SHADOW UNIT

Emma Bull, Elizabeth Bear, Sarah Monette, Will Shetterly, Leah Bobet & Holly Black.

Season 1

Table of Contents

- Credits
- Prologue: Anomalous Crimes

1.01 "Breathe" - by Emma Bull

- Act I
- Act II
- Act III
- Act IV
- Act V
- Learn to Swim
- WTF BBQ
  - Part 1
  - Part 2
  - Part 3
  - Part 4
  - Part 5

1.02 "Knock on Coffins" - by Elizabeth Bear

- Act I
- Act II
- Act III
- Act IV
- Act V
- Tapeworm
- The Living Word
- Significant
- Standoff

1.03 "Dexterity" - by Sarah Monette

- Act I
- Act II
- Act III
- Act IV

Act V
Four Horsemen
Oranges
1.04 "A Handful of Dust" - by Will Shetterly
Act I
Act II
Act III
Act IV
Act V
Sweetheart
The Sociopath in the Street
Caterpillar
1.05 "Ballistic" - by Sarah Monette, Emma Bull, Elizabeth Bear & Amanda Downum
Act I
Act II
Act III
Act IV
Act V
Epilogue
Providence
Daphne Worth's LiveJournal, Oct. 11th, 2007
Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Oct. 15th, 2007
Toolbox
1.06 "Endgames" - by Emma Bull
Act I
Act II
Act III
Act IV
Act V
Plunger
Chaz Villete's LiveJournal, Nov. 11th, 2007 – Nov. 14th, 2007
1.07 "Overkill" - by Elizabeth Bear

- Act I
- Act II
- Act III
- Act IV
- Act V

Commentary

Valentine

The Frogs

Li'l Nikki: the web's worst comic

Pavement

Faith

The It

Frostbite

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Jan. 4th, 2008 – Jan. 6th, 2008

Hafidha Gates's LiveJournal, Jan. 10th, 2008

Hand

Gunmetal

Pleco

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Feb. 19th, 2008 - Feb. 20th, 2008

Ring Finger

Return of Pleco

Mumm-ra

Hafidha Gates's LiveJournal, May 8th, 2008

Lying

Third Base

1.08 "Refining Fire" - by Elizabeth Bear and Emma Bull

- Day 1
- Day 2
- Day 3
- Day 4
- Day 5

- Day 6
- Day 7

The Scene

Vigil

- Part 1
- Part 2
- Part 3
- Part 4
- Part 5
- Part 6
- Part 7

Therapeutic Policy

Two-handed Grip

Fox and Coyote

Spiral

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, June 5th, 2008

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Prologue: Anomalous Crimes

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., January 8, 2002

Supervisory Special Agent Esther Falkner had been told more than once by people she trusted in the Bureau that her next assignment would be something prominent. Perhaps even chief of the Behavioral Analysis Unit, they'd hinted. She'd done good work there.

This cramped wing down the hall from the BAU, this echoing room smelling of paint and carpet adhesive, these empty clustered desks stark under fluorescent light--this was the opposite of prominent.

Falkner passed between the desks toward the far wall with its three doors. One stood ajar. As she got closer, she could hear the swift click of keys.

Inside, a man sat at a requisitioned desk on a requisitioned chair, typing on a black Thinkpad. He would have fit Mr. Hoover's expectations--short-haired, clean-shaven, leanly muscular--except for the darkness of his skin. His ink-blue suit, white shirt, and dark tie might have been requisitioned, too.

The tie was silk, the shirt was Egyptian cotton, and the perfect-fitting jacket might have cashmere in it. Perhaps Mr. Hoover wouldn't approve, after all.

The man looked up. *Cold eyes.* No; his face was still as frozen water, neutral as the wall behind him, but his eyes were intent, unblinking. Not cold at all.

She wondered when he'd learned to hide himself behind his own face. She'd learned how at West Point.

"Agent Falkner," he said. "I'm Stephen Reyes."

"Sir."

He shook his head. "On paper, I lead this unit. But if you take the assignment, I'll be listening to you at least as often as you do to me. I know you've heard it before, but at this end of the hall, it's true: we need results more than hierarchy." Reyes gave a smile that told her nothing. "But if we screw up, I get the blame."

That might or might not be true. "When I was assigned here, no one mentioned what you were set up to do."

His eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch, and his voice was dry when he said, "It was suggested we take need-to-know seriously."

"Does this shadow unit have a name?"

He smiled suddenly. If what it revealed was honest, she thought she might be able to like Stephen Reyes. "The Anomalous Crimes Task Force."

"That doesn't tell me much."

"It will." When she hesitated, he added, "You can turn this down. It won't hurt your career. You might even get brownie points for being smart enough to turn it down."

She thought of her husband and her daughters. "This isn't Mr. Hoover's Bureau anymore."

Reyes shrugged. "The FBI's official position then was that the Mafia didn't exist. We just have different secrets now."

Falkner glanced around the bare office. Promotion or punishment? "I don't mean to be uncooperative--"

"But you can't commit without knowing more."

She was good at her job, damn it. She deserved at least to know if that would be wasted here. "I think that's fair."

Reyes said, "What do you know about Brian Mikkelson?"

"The Tempe Skinner? Twelve known victims, all gay males. Possibly twenty more. The Bureau lost two agents taking him."

Reyes spun his laptop on his desk so she could see its black screen. "Mikkelson made videos."

"I never heard--"

"Need-to-know covers a surprising amount of terrain. This is a copy of one tape." Reyes tapped the touchpad.

An elapsed-time window showed at the bottom of the screen. When the video stopped, it read fifty-two seconds.

"Faked?" She couldn't wrench her gaze away from the final frozen image.

"Probably not. According to the imaging experts here, at Langley, and at Industrial Light and Magic."

Fifty-two seconds. That was what it took to learn that the unimaginable was possible. To see that the boundaries of reality were further away than she'd thought.

Reyes blacked the screen. "Well?"

Falkner met Reyes's eyes over the laptop. "That's an anomalous crime?"

"One of them. This unit exists to find and stop people like Mikkelson."

"So there are more people who can do *that*."

"Or worse."

The boundaries of reality had moved. Her job could expand to fit them. "Where do we start?"

Reyes pointed with his chin, out the door toward the empty front room. "Let's fill those desks."

shadow unit

1.01 "Breathe" - by Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

March 2007

Breathing comes first.

It's a scalp wound. There's a lot of blood. The water thins it to run and smear across his face and trickle outward from his hair on the wet tiles.

But what matters is breathing. His chest doesn't move. His lips are turning the color people call blue, that isn't.

She should be doing chest compressions--the heel of her hand should be right there. *She's holding the thing down instead. If she doesn't let go, he dies. If she does, they both die.*

Breathing first. His, hers, its.

Breathe*, she begs, as if begging ever helped.* Breathe.

*

Daphne Worth meant to be the last one through the briefing room door. New kid gets last pick of the chairs, after all. The others would have habits, and know each other's. She'd take what was left.

But she had firehouse nerves--when the bell rang, you jumped. Not that everyone else hadn't jumped, too. But to them, Falkner's "Briefing room, please," appeared to mean send-email-then-briefing-room, or fetch-coffee-then- briefing-room, or make-one-more-phone-call-then- briefing-room. So Worth walked into the briefing room with Reyes and Falkner--the two whose places she least wanted to sit in by accident--somewhere behind her. She looked around for something to pretend to be distracted by.

She didn't have much to work with. *It's symbolic,* she thought. *Shadow Unit is in the closet, after all.*

"Closet" was exaggerating--about the room, at least. But it could have passed for a good-sized storeroom, and it had no windows. *Maybe they test for claustrophobia when they evaluate applicants*. There was space for the rectangular dark wood table, six rolling chairs, a built-in cabinet on the short wall to the left of the door with a big LCD monitor in it, a whiteboard on the opposite wall, and walking room around it all. Barely. The pale ash-blue paint on the walls was probably soothing. Worth wondered how frantic she'd be feeling if it were yellow.

Nicolette Lau was already there, dropping a pile of manila Bureau-logo jackets full of case documents on the table. One side of her smooth layered black hair was tucked behind her ear. She wore a scarlet boat-neck sweater and narrow gray trousers; she made the room look like part of her accessorizing strategy.

Lau had shown Worth around the unit the day before. She'd talked fast, moved fast, and grinned like a kid who'd scammed her way into Six Flags. She'd managed to convey that the FBI was passable, and the Behavioral Analysis Unit (of which they were part) was pretty good, but Shadow Unit was the cool kids' party.

Lau had probably never been afraid to sit in the wrong chair in her life.

She smiled at Worth. Outside the door Esther Falkner said, "You know he's right. And you know it's not fair to him."

Lau looked toward the door. Worth followed her gaze, but there was nothing to see except a view of the desks in the bullpen.

"'Right' isn't my first concern in this. Or 'fair.'" That was Stephen Reyes, and from the sound, he and Falkner were at Reyes's office next to the briefing room. Worth heard Reyes's door close.

She turned back to find Lau half-frowning at the doorway. "Everything okay?"

Lau shook her head and put the grin back on. "Mom and Dad using the serious voices. It'd be wrong not to at least *try* to eavesdrop." She tipped her head toward the chair at the whiteboard end of the table. "Reyes gets to watch the door. Otherwise it's general admission."

New kid also doesn't get told everything. Worth rolled out the nearest chair and sank into it. "How do you prefer people to discharge their enormous debts to you?"

"Chocolate? Spa weekends? Phone numbers of smart, funny, good-looking single guys?"

"Cheap at twice that."

"Here, have a case file," Lau slid a folder across the table.

Before Worth could open it, Daniel Brady sauntered in and dropped into the chair beside her. The chair creaked. *Muscle weighs more than fat*. There was a lot of muscle on Daniel Brady, and a lot of Daniel Brady, at noticeably over six feet and a door's width of shoulders, to wear it on. Add the sand-blond hair, coldpack-blue eyes, and a well-tailored light blue dress shirt and dark silk tie, and he took up more than his share of the room.

"Hey, New Kid." He smiled, which at close quarters was overwhelming. "How you feel?"

Worth cast her eyes around the room, waved at the case file, and grimaced. "How many points do I lose if I say, 'Scared'?"

"Yeah, I remember that." Lau tapped another folder before she slid it across to Brady. "You've caught a good starter, though."

Brady opened it and flipped past the first pages. "Hey, no lie. It's even blood-free."

"I can manage blood." *Hackles down. Nobody cares about your macho here, Daphne.*

Brady raised his eyebrows. "That's right, you were a paramedic. Not a lot of people go from emergency med to law enforcement. One buzz is enough for 'em."

"Well, first responder is all about nasty surprises."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lau's head tilt forward. Brady's reaction was a lack of reaction. "We still get a few of those around here," he said.

Apparently her new coworkers could spot a dodge when they heard one. Of course they could.

A tall pencil-thin woman with burnished brown skin and long dark-copper braids swept in the door. She wore oversized glasses with steel frames that dwarfed her fine-boned face. Under her arm she carried a laptop that matched the glasses; she balanced it with an enormous coffee mug in her other hand.

"You must be the new fish," she said, clunking the mug (which was embossed with Chinese bats and full of coffee, extra-light) on the tabletop next to Worth. She set the laptop down carefully after it and stuck her right hand out. "Hafidha Gates. Not *that* Gates. *I* can actually code. I am, among other things, Priestess to our electronic demon-gods."

Worth shook her hand. "Pleased to meet you. Daphne Worth."

"Which, of course, I knew, but hey, we observe the forms."

Gates's eyes were an improbable violet, her nail polish was cobalt, and her braids were wrapped with thread in stacked bands of color. Rainbow...but with black and brown? Gray, white, gold, and silver--oh. "Bad beer rots our young guts, but vodka goes well; get some now," Worth said, all in a rush. Brady's head turned; Lau's eyes widened. Worth felt her face heat up.

But Gates bounced happily in her chair. "You know resistor color coding?"

"My dad's an electrical engineer. Retired."

"Old school. I'm surprised you don't know the politically incorrect mnemonics."

She drew breath to recite them and thought, *Easy, girl.* "Not from my dad. I thought nobody used that stuff anymore."

"Mostly not. But I am prepared for any eventuality. Chaz," Gates called past Worth's shoulder, "one of those had better be for me."

Worth turned to see a young, brown-haired, sallow-skinned man, taller than Brady and even thinner than Gates, slide into the room and around the end of the table.

My God, thin. She'd once delivered an anorexic kid having a heart attack to the ER. This man was almost that skinny, from what she could see of his face, neck, and wrists. The rest of him was hidden by a wool jacket, a heavy crewneck sweater, a limp shirt collar, and corduroys going pale at the seams.

It's March, for pity's sake. Cherry blossoms on the Mall in a week or two. It's not that *cold.*

His attention was on his coffee cup, as if he expected it to spill. He got it safely to the table before he looked up at Gates and shook his hair absently out of his eyes. His cheekbones looked as if he'd borrowed them from a larger head. "One of what?"

"There are muffins in your pockets."

His eyes widened almost painfully. "No, there aren't."

Gates lowered her chin, glared, and held her hand out.

Brady shook his head. "She's got radar. Give it up, kid."

"Before she jacks my Dove minis again," Lau added.

The skinny man sighed. "Morning glory or chocolate chip?"

"Duh." Gates wagged her extended hand.

"You suck." He pulled napkin-wrapped bundles out of his jacket pockets and tossed one to Gates. When she caught it one-handed, he smiled. It stretched his wide mouth even wider, and showed white slightly-crooked front teeth.

"Fiber's good for you," Gates said firmly. "Have you met Daphne Worth?"

He gave Worth a startled look and turned to Gates. "I'm not going to be Shaggy."

Worth thought she kept the annoyance off her face.

Gates snorted. "'Course not, Smarty-boy. You're the dog." She made it sound like a compliment.

"Duke can be Shaggy," Lau added.

Brady nodded. "Good choice."

The skinny man turned back to Worth. "Sorry." He managed to smile and grimace simultaneously. She thought of a Discovery Channel special on frogs, and smiled weakly back. "Hi. I'm Charles Villette. Chaz." He subsided into a chair as if his bones were dissolving. He peeled the napkin back from his king-size muffin, broke it in half, and ate one half in two bites.

Gates had already made the chocolate chip one disappear.

Esther Falkner swept in the door, snagged the folder Lau held up without breaking stride, and pivoted to lean against the wall next to the whiteboard. She made leaning look formal, and her navy trouser suit and crisp white blouse looked as if they could hold a lesser mortal upright by themselves. Her dark hair was pulled back hard and anchored with a tortoiseshell clasp. The style made an aggressive display of her pale handsome face, the creases around her eyes and mouth. It made her look as if she had nothing to hide.

Falkner caught her staring. Worth felt as if she were looking into a pair of surveillance cameras. But Falkner's lips quirked at one corner. "Agent Worth. Finding your feet?"

"I...think so." Worth cleared her throat. "I don't really know yet. I guess." *Oh, the avalanche of stupid*.

Gates patted her shoulder and said to Falkner, "It's okay. We've got her."

Which was embarrassing and comforting, all at once.

Falkner nodded. "It's only a little weirder here than Down the Hall, really." "Down the Hall" was the BAU. The BAU referred to Shadow Unit the same way. When they didn't refer to it as the WTF.

"Except when it's a whole lot weirder," Brady said.

"Except then. Feel free to ask if anything seems especially odd." Falkner's expression was serene, her voice level. Worth wondered how she managed to seem ironic anyway.

Falkner surveyed the table. "Is Duke--Todd--in yet?"

"Still on the phone," Villette answered, licking muffin sugar off his fingers.

"We can start without him," Stephen Reyes said from just behind Worth's left shoulder. If she'd had coffee, she would have spilled it. He must have got in the door while Worth's attention was on Falkner. Had he noticed her twitch? Probably.

Lau handed him a case file across the table, and he squeezed along the wall behind Brady, Worth, and Gates to get to the chair reserved for him.

Worth had interviewed with him a month ago when she'd put in for the transfer. Usually she could figure out how she was doing in an interview. In

that one, all she could tell was that Reyes could have written a policies and procedures manual for Daphne Worth by the time it was over.

Down the Hall, the descriptions of Stephen Reyes included words like "intense," "charisma," "animal magnetism," and "obsessive high-handed son of a bitch." She wasn't sure about the last bit yet, but the first three seemed right.

He was shorter than Villette or Brady or even Falkner. His skin was a shade or two lighter than the dark wood of the table, and bits of silver caught the light in the pruned brambles of his hair. He wore a wine-red v-neck sweater and brushed khakis: Giorgio Armani on Casual Friday.

He laid the folder down in front of him; but instead of opening it, his attention moved swiftly over the team, as if rating each of them on some scale only he knew. Left to right, Gates, Worth (she felt as if she were in an interrogation room, and Reyes was the mirror she couldn't see through), Brady, Lau, Villette--a fraction of an instant longer on Villette, an instant's tightening of his mouth--and Falkner, who eyed Reyes back, perfectly unreadable.

Mom and Dad and the serious voices, Worth thought. That look meant something.

Reyes brought his attention back to the visible spectrum and Worth. "Agent Worth. Introductions all made?"

"Yes, sir." Her voice was steady this time.

"Glad you're on board," he said, and smiled. It made him a different person. Human, for one thing.

"Thank you, sir." She swallowed and tried not to let the rush of gratitude go to her head. If Shadow Unit weren't at the center of a black hole in Bureau hierarchy, Reyes would be Unit Chief. He had created the unit. He'd been doing this four years ago when Worth first learned what Shadow Unit did. What she'd spent the intervening time getting into a position to do now. If she didn't screw up.

"Let's get to work," Reyes said.

Lau rose like a batter stepping into a pitch. She was what, five foot four? She looked taller now, and cool, professional, focused. Worth mentally replayed

yesterday's conversations with her for things she'd want to live down. "We're going to Los Angeles," said Lau. "Five cases of death by suffocation in the last six weeks."

"Oh, crap," said a voice from the door. "Not Los Angeles. I hate Los Angeles."

"They did it to annoy you," Falkner said. "Where were you?"

The man in the doorway was somewhere in his early fifties, smallish and lean. He had brown thinning hair and bland blue eyes behind metal-rimmed glasses, and wore a corduroy jacket over an open-collared shirt. His hands were in his pockets.

Lau's face broke from professional mode into the grin. "Hey, Duke." She waved at the chair she'd just left. The newcomer ambled in and dropped into it.

"North Dakota ritual suicides?" Reyes sounded sympathetic. Worth wondered if anyone had ever said those four words in that way before.

The newcomer, whose name couldn't really be Duke, shrugged. "I told 'em what they were looking for. They keep leaving me phone messages saying people don't do things like that in North Dakota."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Reyes said.

"If I lived in North Dakota," Gates muttered, "I would."

The newcomer leaned up out of the chair and thrust his right hand across the table at Worth. "You must be Agent Worth. I'm Sol Todd."

Solomon Todd. Down the Hall the boys in ties--the new ones--rolled their eyes when his name came up, and sometimes mentioned hippies. Worth had noticed that the older ones didn't. *But you look so normal*, Worth wanted to say. Instead she shook his hand and said, "Sir."

Todd dropped back into his seat. "I am called by many names. That's not usually one of them. But I swore to uphold the First Amendment along with the others, so I have to leave the matter up to you."

Of all the difficult terrain of the last twenty-four hours, that required the most scrambling. "What...would you rather be called?"

"Oh, I'll answer to anything that doesn't already belong to someone else."

Villette extinguished a laugh with a mouthful of coffee.

Falkner said, "'Todd' for formal, 'Sol' for casual, 'Duke' for *Fear and Loathing*-related moments. Anything else promotes a disruptive work environment." She nodded to Lau. "It's safe now."

Lau turned her right wrist and the LCD monitor came to life. Worth spotted the little oval remote in Lau's hand. "All five victims died in public places, out of sight of witnesses." On the monitor, a snapshot of a slender, smiling black woman. "LaDona Benson, age 26, in a supermarket parking lot in Studio City.

"Cristina Echeverria, 30, in a stall in the women's restroom of an all-night diner in Hollywood." A plump Hispanic woman sullen in a bad portrait, maybe from a work I.D.

"James Cookson, 38, outside the back door of the bar where he worked in North Hollywood." A white man's driver's license photo, his face sagging, his eyes wide.

"Alonso Morro, 29, at a bus stop near Universal City." Morro looked older than 29. Worth double-checked her case file. Lau was right.

"Gerianne Sussman, 32, another parking lot." Sussman was round-faced, blonde, and grinning; Worth recognized a bit of the Dumbo ride at Disneyland in the photo's background. Lau looked over her shoulder at the team, as if in punctuation. "Of Holy Cross Medical Center, Burbank."

"She died of suffocation outside a *hospital*?" Todd repeated.

"Brain damage happens in four to six minutes in the absence of oxygen," Villette offered, with relish Worth hoped was academic. "The victim goes unconscious well before that. Any struggle would have been short enough that it could have been missed even by witnesses fairly close by."

He was right, which spared Worth having to say anything. But that was *her* area of expertise, damn it.

Brady flipped through the pages of the case file. "No crime scene photos?"

"They wouldn't have been reported as crimes," Reyes said.

Lau's gaze flew to him, surprised; then she nodded. "Natural causes. The county medical examiner threw the flag."

MEs were like that. Five unexplained asphyxiations in six weeks would be a personal affront. "The ME knew to call us?" Worth asked.

"Anomalous Crimes Task Force education and outreach," Lau replied. "We try to make sure law enforcement and forensics around the country know what to look for."

Reyes snorted. Unlike Villette's squashed laugh, it didn't sound amused. "To be more precise, we tell them when to call us. We never tell them what they're looking for."

No, Worth knew that from personal experience.

Falkner's chin came up; but whatever she was going to say, she seemed to think better of, and turned the motion into a nod at the monitor. "I still see dead people."

Three women, two men. Two Anglo, two Hispanic, one African-American. Ages twenty-six to thirty-eight. "Do they have *anything* in common?" Worth asked. "Other than asphyxia?"

"They all lived in the East Valley." Lau shook her head. "Sorry--the east end of the San Fernando Valley. But that's still a big pool to fish in."

"Autopsy results?" Villette asked, hopeful as a terrier.

Lau raised one shoulder. "Just the routine autopsies in the jacket. No sign of drugs or toxins in the bloodstream, no external bruising or ligature marks, nothing in the victims' airways."

Reyes shook his head. "Routine won't cut it."

"Gerianne Sussman died thirty-two hours ago." Villette said it without a pause to do the math.

"See if her body's been released to the family yet," Falkner said to Lau.

"We want it sent to Frost?"

"Unless she's backed up. Is there a pathologist on the Left Coast we've worked with?"

"Brunelli at UCLA. I'll check with Frost first." Talking families into letting their loved ones be sliced 'n' diced: high on Worth's list of jobs she wouldn't want. She wondered if Lau was good at it. Probably. From what she knew, they were all good at what they did.

What am I *doing here?*

"Catholic hospital," Todd said. "Could be a religious component."

Villette shrugged. "Hospital, period. Could be a medical connection."

Brady leaned back in his chair, frowning, hands laced behind his head. Worth dodged his elbow as inconspicuously as she could. "If we don't know the mechanism for the suffocation, we've got nothing to read mythology from."

Worth almost didn't ask. *But there are no stupid questions. Only stupid new kids asking them*. "Mythology?"

"The host's understanding of how the world works and his place in it." Reyes talked with his hands: the circle of the world, an upright palm and fingers edge-on for the hypothetical subject. If Reyes were ever allowed to lecture at Quantico on gammas--on the anomaly and its hosts--this was what it would sound like. "Hosts justify their anomalous abilities according to their mythologies. I am a special agent of God. The aliens experimented on me. I was bitten by a radioactive spider."

Across the table Villette gave a surprised cough and resorted to his coffee cup again. Todd beamed at Reyes.

Reyes pretended not to notice. "Once the anomaly has taken hold in a host, the host applies past experience of science, nature, religion--their story of the world--to explain what happened to them, what they're doing, and how they're doing it. Just as mythology explained the natural world to early humans."

"So...the mythology determines how the gamma kills?"

"It can." Villette's mouth flattened and stretched, and he frowned. "A blood clot, for instance, suggests knowledge of physiology, affinity for science. Massive bleeding from unlikely sources, especially if the physiological triggers are all over the map--that's usually a little more Old Testament."

Worth wondered if he'd meant to startle her. If so, it hadn't worked. She felt rather pleased.

Reyes leaned forward and folded his arms on the table. "Lau, you're a Valley girl, right?"

"Totally," Lau drawled.

"Good. You and Worth cover the victimology. If there's anything locally out of the ordinary, you'll spot it."

Easy for you to say, Worth thought, but Lau nodded.

"I'll see what I can get on the scenes," Brady said. "Could tell us whether this guy is up close and personal, or likes to keep his hands clean."

Todd raised his shoulders, a constrained stretch that didn't invade Villette's airspace in the chair beside him. "Do I have to choose between Los Angeles and North Dakota, or do I get lucky and there's a case that needs attention in some snake-infested swamp?"

"Hey!" Lau swatted at him. "My home town."

"North Dakota has dibs," Falkner replied. "We'll call if we need you, though."

"Let's get some stats pulled together," Reyes said. "We can look them over on the plane. Hafidha?"

Gates patted her laptop. "On it. You want the usual dirt, extra dirt, or the family-style dirt for six?"

"Residence, work, and medical history first?" Villette suggested. "I can start on the geographic profile--"

"Do it on the plane," Reyes said.

"The--" The stop in Villette's voice was so complete Worth looked up to see if he needed a Heimlich. Everyone at the table looked--first at Villette, then at Reyes. Everyone except Falkner, who was putting much thought into squaring the pages inside her folder and closing it. Villette's eyes were wide, his face flushed like a bad sunburn.

"You're going with us." Reyes stood up. "See me in my office. Everyone, wheels up in two hours. Agent Worth, Brady will fill you in on travel

protocol."

"Can do," Brady nodded.

They stood up, all but Villette, who looked as if he were recovering from being hit over the head. Reyes launched himself out the door. Worth grabbed her copy of the case file and stuck herself to Brady's heel.

She followed him out to the bullpen. His desktop was relentlessly neat and almost bare; only the fact that the keyboard, the phone, and the desk lamp didn't line up with the edges suggested he wasn't obsessive-compulsive. "Ex-military?" she said before she could stop herself.

He turned suddenly, so she was too close to him. "Yeah. Trying to prove something?"

For an instant she missed his meaning. "No! I just-- Sorry. I shouldn't say these things out loud."

Another beat; then he dropped his gaze. "But when you see something that talks to you, you forget nobody said it in so many words."

"It's hell on my social life." She shifted her weight backwards, and didn't care if it looked like a retreat.

"I get that. Okay, you've worked in BAU-Normal for a while. We work about the same way, only faster and more often on-site. Mostly because our cases involve more shit and a bigger fan. Got a go bag here?"

"Under my desk." Worth caught her breath and added, "Lau warned me yesterday."

Brady's expression softened just enough that she could tell it had. "It's usually table to tarmac around here, but they sucker-punched Chaz with the news. I'm guessing that two hours is to give him a chance to pack."

As he spoke, Gates came out of the briefing room. Her braids swung as she turned to say something to Villette behind her. Villette's shoulders were raised, his hands in his pockets. Whatever Gates said made his smile flash out and his shoulders drop.

Gates raised a hand, little finger extended and bent. Villette hooked his little finger in hers. Then he half-loped down to Reyes's door and disappeared through it.

Pinky swear? There was something going on there. Romance? Not quite. And the business with the muffins-- "I don't want to pry..."

Brady smiled and sat on his desk. It made his head more or less level with hers. "Sure you do."

Her face heated up. "I just don't want to put my foot in it my first week. Is there anything I should know about Gates and Villette?"

"Yep. Just not what you think."

She closed her teeth on "How do you know what I think?" and was rewarded with an apologetic shrug. He said, "Tell me what you know about basic gamma 4-1-1."

And that, she supposed, was Brady's way of telling her to mind her own business and stick to the job. Rookie status wasn't forever, at least. "Gammas are people affected by the anomaly. The anomaly gives its hosts freaky non-human abilities, makes them unnaturally tough, and motivates them to do very bad things."

Brady laughed. "Jesus, Reyes would burst a blood vessel if he heard that."

"Too basic?"

"Not for me. But my short version makes him crazier than yours would. No, Reyes complicates it, but that's the gist. So we--the anomaly-free population--are alphas. The monsters are gammas." He leaned back, palms on the desktop behind him. "Far as anybody knows, Hafidha Gates and Chaz Villette are the world's only betas."

Not a change of subject. Not anything she'd expected. "They're..." Worth floundered for a word, exact, scientific, inoffensive. "...They're anomalous?"

"Freaky non-human abilities. You know about the calorie-burn in gammas? Takes a hell of a lot of fuel to do what they do."

"Conservation of energy."

Brady nodded. "Wait'll you see Hafidha or Chaz eat lunch. Almost unbe-fuckin'-lievable."

"But they're--they're not..."

"Dangerous?" He shook his head. "Also, gammas have an external manifestation. Their freak thing affects more than just the gamma itself. With Hafidha and Chaz, it's all internal. Perception and processing. The anomaly doesn't act directly on anything but them."

"But it...acts."

Brady nodded. "Hafidha says hers is like having perfect pitch for computers. And she can spot gamma activity when it's related to something she's got on the screen." He shifted his feet and frowned. "She says things display in colors, and audio files get flakey. Don't ask me. I have no idea."

"Synesthesia?"

"She says it's not."

The big tough guy knows from synesthesia. "And Villette?"

"There are three Ph.D.s in the unit. Two of 'em are Chaz's. Apparently, he moves numbers through time and space." Brady straightened up, surfed his hands toward each other and interlaced the fingers. "He spots patterns."

Worth looked again at Reyes's door, now closed; then at the door to the computer room where Gates had gone.

Villette and Gates weren't monsters. Monsters did nightmare miracles and trailed damage as they walked. Monsters didn't laugh or tease or chatter or show off.

She'd sat in the briefing room and watched them eat muffins. Muffins they *needed* to eat. The brain drew twenty percent of the body's total energy consumption. When the anomaly reset their neurological clock speed, did the percentage go up? And thin--of course they were thin. Gammas lost weight.

But Villette and Gates weren't gammas. Gammas were monsters.

She turned back to find Brady looking sympathetic. "Makes your head spin?"

If they were dangerous, Brady would say so. "You've just kicked the crap out of my whole concept of the universe."

"Yeah." He levered himself up off his desk. "We get that a lot around here."

Co-workers. Agents. Not any more strange than the rest of these strangers. "This is Villette's first time in the field?"

"He's been on a desk for the past year. He's an SA. He knows the job--he just hasn't done it yet." He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out the brown leather duffle bag that filled it. His hands hovered over the straps, as if he wanted something to do that wasn't talking.

"So which of us worries you most?"

His divinely-inspired jaw worked. "All right, if you want full disclosure. That's a hard call. It's not your first hunt, like it is Chaz's. But you haven't met our kind of boogeyman." He concentrated on sliding the case folder in the side pocket of his bag. "It can throw you off your game."

Worth thought about correcting him, and decided against it. "Reyes and Falkner must think we can look out for ourselves."

He shrugged. "You're probably right. You've met 'em. They do a lot of thinking."

Act II

Reyes watched Chaz Villette cross his office like slow-motion pinball, touching and rebounding from the bookshelves, the window, the Chagall print. Not slow, really; just slow for a pinball game.

"You can sit down," Reyes offered.

Chaz quirked his eyebrows, embarrassed, and dropped into the chair across the desk. Game over.

Body language was one of the mainstays of Reyes's work. He knew how to control his own and read the subject's, so he knew he looked comfortable and relaxed. Chaz looked like a dog ready for a release word.

But since Chaz was in the same line of work, it was hard to tell what that meant.

"I want to know if you're ready for a field assignment," Reyes said.

Unfeigned surprise. Chaz blinked, sat back, and dropped his gaze to his hands splayed over his thighs. What Reyes could see of his face was still and

guarded. Good. If he couldn't hide what was in his head, he had no business out there. The momentary pinch of regret Reyes felt was probably because he would have liked an excuse to forbid this trip.

"I thought that was your call." Chaz's voice was unemphatic.

"It is. I also trust your judgment. You know enough to be able to tell me if you should get on that plane."

Chaz's chin stayed tucked, but he lifted his eyes to Reyes's. The light from the window caught the left one, the one with the colors in it, and heightened the difference. "After you announced it to the team? It would look funny if I didn't."

"Not a good basis for a decision."

At the corner of Chaz's mouth, a moment's compression. "Even though you wouldn't have said it in front of the team if you didn't mean to stand by it." He watched Reyes for a reaction.

Reyes raised his eyebrows and let him read what he wanted from it.

"I'm ready," Chaz said.

"Falkner thinks it's unfair to keep you at the desk. That's also not a good basis for this decision, but I mention it so you know your judgment has backup."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you still a lousy shot?"

Chaz blinked again; an uncalculated smile split his face. "Most of 'em go through paper."

He was better than that. But Reyes knew what Chaz's firearms scores were. (And Chaz knew that Reyes knew, but the game had rules, and you broke them only out of need.)

Reyes opened his right top desk drawer, took out a molded plastic box, and slid it across the desk to Chaz. "Carry that."

Chaz popped the latches and laid the lid back. He stared at the taser cushioned in foam, studied it without touching. "Non-lethal force." He

tapped the plate on the side where the voltage was displayed, and gaped across the box lid at Reyes. "Except this would be."

"To anyone not affected by the anomaly. So see that you only use it on the host."

"You found someone to build you a custom gamma-buster?" Chaz lifted the weapon out of the foam, gingerly, looked it over, put it back. "You could probably get thrown out of the Bureau for having this in your *desk*."

"Then don't let the guys at the metal detectors downstairs look too close. Keep it charged, keep it with you. You'll get one full-power burst; that's all the charge it'll hold. If it's useful, we'll be able to make a case for carrying them."

Chaz tilted his head, dubious. Reyes didn't think they'd ever get approval for them, either.

"Strictly close-in." Again, Chaz's voice was neutral. Reyes wondered how hard he'd had to work to keep it that way.

"Insurance."

"Not to mention improved odds we'll bring the host in alive."

No one else on the team would have said it aloud. "We don't learn anything from dead gammas," Reyes replied.

Chaz slapped the lid closed and hefted the box. "I'll try to get there first, then."

"Try not to get killed, please."

"That, too." Chaz stood. "Any more tests, Dr. Reyes?"

Busted. Reyes looked up, expecting something hard in Chaz's face. But Chaz was smiling, the wide-open look that shone out with increasing frequency.

"You don't have time for them. Call motor pool and get someone to drive you home to pack."

Chaz was already out of the room, but he caught the doorframe and let it pivot him back to beam at Reyes. "No problem. Go bag's in my drawer."

And the doorway was empty.

Reyes propped his elbows on the desk and leaned his forehead on his laced fingers. Falkner was right. Charles Villette hadn't joined Shadow Unit to ride a desk chair. And the team needed him in the field; his brain could save more lives than a weapon.

There was always a chance someone wouldn't come back; and no loss was acceptable. This time was no different.

His left elbow rested on a folder. He slid it to the center of the desk and opened it.

It was only a sample of the documents; the rest were locked in the bottom drawer of the cabinet across the room. But Reyes knew every detail of the story.

The photo clipped to the third page stared up at him: a formal school portrait of a thirteen-year-old boy. Copper-brown skin tight over jutting cheekbones and long knife-blade nose, without the softness of puppy-fat. Brown hair cut short and severe, eyes staring into the lens, crooked front teeth showing between stretched, parted lips.

Not a smile, though a casual observer might mistake it for one. The eyes said, *Keep looking. You won't find me in here.* It was a photo of a feral animal looking out through a human face.

It was Chaz Villette, eleven years earlier.

Hard to believe the eager, energetic, brilliant man who'd just left that chair had ever been that wary, calculating child.

As hard as believing the feral animal wasn't still inside.

*

"We have a *plane*?" Worth said, stumbling on nothing on the ramp outside the gate at National. At least she'd managed not to squeak the last word. The business jet looked like the star of a photo shoot, reflecting in the rain-glossed pavement, boarding stairs beckoning.

"Gulfstream 450," Lau called back over her shoulder. "Cruising speed mach point-eight, range from here, most of the Western Hemisphere plus Europe and north and west Africa. She don't suck." Lau's family was Air Force, Worth remembered.

Behind Worth, Reyes said, "If we have to go at all, we have to go yesterday. I'm sure the GAO wishes it were otherwise."

Worth bit her lip. Was the right answer to that "Yes, sir" or "No, sir?" But she was at the foot of the boarding stairs, and it was too late to answer at all. She followed Lau and Brady up and through the door.

The cabin was a cross between commercial first class and a hotel sitting room. And unlike the briefing room, eight people could occupy it with room to spare.

Worth's first impression was of a haze of cloud-gray upholstery. She passed single seats to the right and left of the aisle, then a pair facing each other on the right side with a fold-out table between them, like a two-person booth in a restaurant. Across the aisle on the left a full-size couch followed the cabin wall under the round windows.

The last four seats were arranged two and two, facing across a larger table, on the right of the aisle. Lau settled by the window in the far front-facing pair. Brady stood in the aisle leaning over her. The filtered morning light glowed on them: Apollo and an unaccountably Asian Diana, faces unlike but related in beauty. Worth felt herself flushing again and fiddled with her messenger bag to hide it.

Brady nodded at something Lau said and straightened up. As much as he could, at least; he was an inch or two taller than the cabin. Lau beckoned Worth and patted the seat back next to her.

"Am I stealing your spot?" Worth asked Brady.

"Not today." He smiled and squeezed past her as she slid into the aisle seat next to Lau.

She had a good view of Villette as he came aboard, leather backpack on one shoulder, for what was obviously the first time. He was also too tall for the available headroom, and ducked more than he needed to. His gaze skittered around the cabin, nervous and penetrating. Then he smiled cautiously.

Brady flagged him on. "You get the window. Damned if I'm going to wedge myself between you and the wall."

Villette looked from Brady standing in the aisle, to Lau and Worth, and back to Brady. "Or I could sit right here." He pointed his chin at the first seat

inside the door, isolated from the others.

Brady stood his ground and looked patient. Villette shrugged, slouched down the aisle, and folded himself into the rear-facing window seat across from Lau. Brady settled in the aisle seat across from Worth.

"Aww," Lau said. "I was going to let him sit in Reyes's spot."

Villette tucked his chin and blushed. "I had good intel."

"Hafidha spoiled your initiation? No fair."

"What's my initiation, then?" Worth asked.

"It's no fun if we tell you in advance," said Brady.

As he did, Reyes came down the aisle and took the forward-facing seat in front of them. Falkner took a cushion off the couch, propped it against the back of the seat across the table from Reyes, and sat down. The "fasten seat belts" lights came on as if they had been waiting for her.

Then the thunder of the trip down the runway, the downward pressure of takeoff--and the disturbing sight of the Potomac close beneath them, as if the plane had jumped off the runway to throw itself in the river. It bothered Worth every time she flew out of National. She hoped it wasn't an omen this time.

When the seat belt lights went out, Falkner clicked hers open and stretched. "Make yourselves comfortable. We're non-stop and high-priority, but it's still a big damned continent."

"'Scuse, gang." Lau slipped easily past Worth's knees and headed for the front of the cabin, where she tapped on the cockpit door. Brady unrolled and headed for the bathroom, and Falkner followed as far as the galley.

Villette--*Chaz*--a Villette ought to be sleek and polished, and he wasn't--eyed her warily from under a sagging lock of hair.

Worth scrambled for a conversational opening other than, *So how's this beta thing working for you?*

Chaz canted his head to the right, which on his long neck looked just short of spinal fracture. "Did someone explain about Hafidha and me?"

Well, then. "Brady told me about betas."

"Does it bother you?"

"Should it?"

His eyelids dropped before he looked toward the window, where nothing showed but sky. "It's a little like bringing the monster along, isn't it? I mean, I'm an anomalous individual." He turned to her and stared, blank and cold.

Lau came up behind him and rapped his scalp with one finger, hard.

"Ow!" said Chaz, and the mask fell off.

"Stop trying to spook the new kid." Lau slithered back into the window seat.

Chaz grinned at Worth. "Sorry. But you didn't fall for it, so point to you."

Another sentence or so, and I might have. "You're sitting back to back with the guy who wrote the book on this stuff."

"Yeah, but he doesn't scare easy."

"Am I not supposed to be able to hear you?" Reyes said without turning around. Worth could see the corner of a photo from the Los Angeles file on the table in front of him.

"Also, he's not deaf," Brady said, sinking down on the near end of the couch across the aisle. Reyes pretended to ignore him.

It gave Worth the nerve to say, "Then betas are hosts, too?"

Chaz pressed into the cabin wall so he could look over the back of his seat at Reyes.

The silence got Reyes's attention. He twisted to stare over his seat back, first at Worth, then at Chaz. Window light reflected off his reading glasses. "You can answer that," he said to Chaz.

Chaz hiked a shoulder. "I don't like to talk about myself."

Reyes took off his glasses and laid them on the table before he turned to consider Worth. Worth didn't think he was as reluctant as he pretended. "We don't know what the anomaly is. But we have models for how it interacts with humanity."

"Genetic mutation. Virus," offered Chaz.

"Brain injury," said Brady, in a tone that made Chaz glare at him. Brady grinned back.

"Demonic possession," Lau said.

"Or parasite and host," Reyes finished. "But that model suggests that the organism is co-opted by the parasite. In betas, the human is in the driver's seat, keeping the anomaly under control. So the host-parasite model doesn't hold there."

Chaz bobbed his eyebrows at Worth. *See? You're perfectly safe*, they said.

"That's probably why betas have no external anomalous manifestation," Reyes added. "The anomaly doesn't have enough control over the body's resources to divert them to extranormal function."

"Besides the brain activity," Chaz added. "What that comes down to is, all our superpowers are up here." He tapped his temple.

"Coffee's up." Falkner set a cup in front of Reyes and stood sipping hers. Chaz looked longingly at it. "You're young and strong," she told him. "Get your own."

Worth turned Reyes's lecture over mentally. "But you can't know any of that for sure. You've only identified two betas."

Reyes gave her a quick, sharp look. The professor was pleased. "The sample isn't large enough. Chaz and Hafidha's manifestations are internal and benign. Gammas have an external manifestation, and the host isn't strong enough to keep the anomaly from doing harm."

"Assuming the host wants to," Lau added.

Reyes nodded. "Assuming that. But you're right, that's only speculation based on what we know about anomaloids so far."

"Anomaloids?" Worth repeated.

"Individuals affected by the anomaly." Chaz's mobile face was stiff, and his voice flat.

"It sounds like a breath mint," Worth blurted. Reyes frowned.

But it made Chaz's face come back on line. "Curiously strong."

"No, no," Lau said. "They're action figures. You feed them teeny tiny plastic food and they turn into airplanes."

Chaz made an alarming noise, as if he were choking on a lung.

"I thought it was a muscle group," Falkner said, unsmiling over her cup.

Brady rummaged in a pocket of his carryon. "No, isn't that the stuff dentists fill cavities with?"

Chaz snorted. Reyes sighed and turned back to the case file.

"Who wants coffee?" Worth asked. Lau and Brady raised their hands.

Chaz popped up, flushed. "I'll help."

Falkner's two cups weren't the only real ones; the cupboard above the coffeemaker held a set of white china mugs. "Oh, thank God," Worth sighed. "I hate the taste of styrofoam."

Chaz frowned and tapped the can of coffee beside them. "Got to fix that for the trip home, though. Some of that grew on a coffee bush, but that's all we can say with certainty."

Worth set out four mugs. While Chaz poured, she said, "Brady says you have two Ph.D.s. Are you older than you look?"

An intent stare. "How old do I look?"

His substantial bones and shortage of body fat skewed his face older. But his skin was fine-textured, the shadow of his beard was faint and patchy, and his squint lines disappeared when he wasn't squinting.

"Twenty...four, twenty-five."

Chaz blinked. "Wow."

"Years of experience figuring out what to tell the ER dispatcher about unconscious people in transit."

"How many years?"

"Four. Straight into Quantico from there."

"Why the Bureau?"

She thought about the complicated and sometimes-unpleasant story, and wondered if she wanted to try to tell it. Then she remembered the start of the conversation. "You *don't* like to talk about yourself, do you?"

His face-splitting smile broke out. "Busted." He picked up two mugs and headed back to the seats.

Lau had her case documents laid out on the table. Chaz set cups beside them and fetched his backpack from overhead. By the time Worth got her messenger bag out, his laptop was open across the table.

"Chronological order?" she asked Lau as she flipped open the file of victims' records.

LaDona Benson was married, a receptionist for a dental lab, mother of two boys, ages five and three. Her husband was a mechanic for a car dealership in North Hollywood.

Cristina Echeverria was divorced, had joint custody of her nine-year-old daughter, and did construction and alterations for a costume company. Her ex-husband lived with his sister in Culver City.

James Cookson tended bar and had two convictions for simple assault, but no wife, or ex-wife, or children.

Alonso Morro worked for a lawn care service. He appeared to have married his wife right after high school, but they had no children. (Worth thought, *But aren't they Catholic?*, and kicked herself for assuming it, whether it meant anything or not.)

Gerianne Sussman was employed in a studio clerical temp pool, divorced, remarried six months ago, and childless.

Lau sat back and scowled at the files. She made scowling look glamorous. "Well, that's a big help so far. Chaz?"

Chaz blinked at Lau and Worth over the screen of his laptop. "You were right. They all lived in the east Valley."

"Also not helping."

Chaz dropped his gaze and shrugged. "Highly mobile population, lots of unrelated data points. Sorry. The one aberration is Echeverria, who didn't die in the San Fernando Valley. But she lived and worked there."

Brady stretched his legs further into the aisle. "Also the only one who died indoors."

Five heads swiveled toward him in unison.

"We don't believe in coincidence," Reyes said.

"But it exists in spite of us," replied Falkner.

"Correlation does not equal causation," Lau announced. Worth didn't understand why she grinned, or why the others stared. "Well, Duke's not here to say it," Lau added.

Brady nodded. "I'll tell him you took care of it." He raised his eyebrows at Chaz. "Sounds like you get some old-fashioned door-to-door police work for your first one, kid."

Chaz eyed him from under his hair and seemed to weigh responses before he settled on, "Mmm."

Worth flipped through the victim photos again. She imagined searching under that jaw for a pulse, envisioned lifting the quiet body that had been warm and active when the picture was taken. Would she forget, someday, the way those things felt? She'd learned distance years ago. One day it might turn into denial. She didn't think she wanted that.

She looked up to find Chaz's under-the-hair look turned on her.

"There's no good way of doing it," she said. "Dying. And they're alone. Even when you're right there."

"Even the bad guys?"

"Maybe there are some bad enough that--I don't know." She pushed a smile across her face. "I'll keep you posted."

He continued to look for just long enough that she felt uncomfortable. Then he nodded and dropped his gaze to his laptop screen.

*

"You'd think anyone who'd flown into or out of Los Angeles wouldn't live there," Falkner said, looking out the window at the veil of yellow-brown air over the city below. They were belted back in for final approach.

Reyes shrugged. "People tell themselves stories. Usually boiling down to, 'It can't be that bad.'" His eyes were turned to the window; Falkner suspected his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Not much to go on so far, particularly if the new autopsy doesn't give us a mechanism for the death."

"If they were easy, they wouldn't end up on our doorstep."

"Compliment duly noted," Falkner replied. "Who's our contact? The medical examiner?"

Reyes shook his head. "Donald Bostwick, Homicide Division. He's the one the ME leaned on."

Beyond Reyes, past the side of Brady's aisle seat, Falkner could see Worth, when she wasn't leaning in across the table to listen to Chaz or Brady or Lau. Shoulders stiff, the line of a small, focused frown between her brows, fingers twisting at the buttons on her jacket sleeves.

How many New Kids had she seen? In the army, then as Supervisory Special Agent? They dealt with it however they had to, but you never knew who they were until they quit dealing with it and relaxed into the job. Brady had arrived buttoned-up, stone-faced, and professional. Lau had worn a flawless PR glaze, as if life were a press conference and her future depended on holding a measured smile. Chaz had shown up in an ill-fitting navy-blue suit and and a painfully fresh haircut, moving like a coyote trapped in a pet carrier.

Now Daphne Worth was in the field on her second day of work, nervous and vigilant for her teammates' cues. It was exhausting to watch. With a pre-med degree and a background in emergency medicine and BAU assignments, she could have come in overconfident, cocky, proud. Instead, she was creeping around the fringes of the herd.

Medium height, medium-brown hair cut medium length and worn pulled back, a trouser suit in one of the gray-tan indeterminate shades catalogs tagged "stone" or "bark" as if those things came in only one color in nature, and a high-collared white blouse. Dressed for success, if success depended on perfect inoffensiveness.

Worth wasn't withholding herself, or her judgment. Chaz had done that. She was waiting for the others to judge her, and she was expecting to fall short.

Falkner sometimes thought her heart was a voodoo doll, full of pins. One each for Ben and the girls. One for each member of the team. She felt the new pin slide in and hoped for the best.

They landed at Burbank, since LAX was a ninety-minute drive to any of the relevant locations. Falkner wondered what the team looked like, motley and unified, striding through the terminal with their minimal baggage. Two cops, a film director, a corporate buyout team, and Chaz. Anyone who could invent a story that accounted for them all was probably already in show business.

The two eggplant-black Crown Vics waiting for them in airport security parking might as well have been stenciled "FBI" on the hoods. They'd be Police Interceptor models and ride like trucks. Falkner stretched her twinging back and reflected that this was what God made Aleve for.

Two new agents--it threw off who rode with whom. Before it became a question, she said, "Reyes, you want to take Chaz and Worth? I'll let Brady chauffeur for Lau and me."

"See you at the station." He raised his eyebrows, which said, *I saw you do that* and *Nice work*.

In the back seat of the car, Lau popped her cell phone and put it on speaker as soon as they left the lot. "Hafidha, we're on the ground and en route."

"And speaking of routing, I now own a chunk of LAPD server and will be there when you need me. It'll feel just like home. If you see Johnny Depp, give him a big wet kiss for me, will you?"

"Hafs, it's the Valley. We'll be lucky to see Jeff Probst."

"Eeuw. When did that become lucky?"

Behind the wheel Brady cleared his throat loud enough to be heard in the next lane of traffic. But Falkner thought she spotted half a smile, there and gone. Good.

The rookies made him nervous. But even nervous, Brady stayed focused on the present and as much of the future as he could do something about. Two

new people could make the team wobble on its axis, but if they did, Brady wouldn't be where it showed up first.

Act III

Brady felt a little of the tightness go out of his jaw as they passed through the doors of the North Hollywood copshop. An angular newish building, designed full of contemporary ideas about community policing, but still palpably a copshop. Dallas stations had never posted air quality alerts in the front hall, but that was just dressing the set. When the lights went down and the curtain up, you knew where you were.

Reyes introduced himself and the rest of the team to Lieutenant Bostwick, and Brady shook hands when called upon.

Bostwick was small, strong, red-cheeked, snub-nosed, about forty, and not happy. "We can talk in the briefing room," he said, and Brady doubted that anyone in earshot expected him to break out in Hallelujah when they got there.

What Bostwick actually said when they got there was, "I want you to know up front. I don't think this is a real good use of your time."

Brady leaned against the frame of the closed door and folded his arms. Chaz pretended to do something with his watch, but Brady was pretty sure it was self-correcting for time zones, and he noticed that Chaz never dropped his gaze far enough that Bostwick was out of field of vision. Falkner assumed perfect parade rest at Reyes's right shoulder; Lau stuck her hands in her trouser pockets and stared at Bostwick as if waiting for the stunt show to start. Worth clutched the strap of her messenger bag and watched everyone at once. Her gaze crossed Brady's, but she didn't react. Good for her.

Reyes tilted his head. Not the bug-on-a-slide look, but the potential for it. "You think we're on a snipe hunt."

"I think this is bullshit by any name. You BAU people have helped us put a lot of murder cases to bed, and I'd be the first guy to call you in on one. But these aren't murders."

"Possibly not." Reyes sounded mild. "Your medical examiner only flagged the deaths as suspicious."

"If we sent you every suspicious death in L.A. County, you'd never get shit done. Look, my understanding is, the gold standard for spotting strangulation is a broken hyoid bone. None of these people had that."

"Other way around, actually." Worth's voice cracked with nerves. "Broken hyoid is usually the result of strangulation, but strangulation doesn't always break the hyoid. And strangulation isn't the only way to asphyxiate someone."

Bostwick frowned at her. She looked back, wide-eyed and unblinking. Brady managed not to smile. *Well done, Grasshopper*.

"Whatever. We waved you in, because better safe than sorry. But I really hope you can do what you do without a lot of local assist. We're gonna be working homicides, and there's not many of us and a whole lot of them."

"One officer per 426 residents," Chaz said. Bostwick blinked. Chaz looked up at him. "New York City's ratio is one to 225." He grimaced. Bostwick seemed to register it as sympathetic. Brady wondered if it was.

"We're fine on our own, Lieutenant," Reyes said. "As long as we have an office to work out of, we're self-contained."

Which, thought Brady, was a nice way of putting it.

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Worth resisted the temptation to wipe her palms on her jacket as she followed Falkner through the front gate and up the walk to the Benson house. It was a 1950s single-story, that might have been called a rambler except that it didn't ramble far. But it was well-kept, with a shaved-looking lawn and mounds of shrubby jasmine in bloom around the foundation. The scent made her slow down and breathe deeper.

Falkner rang the bell. The door opened promptly on a stocky black man in his early 30s, wearing a Lakers t-shirt and gray warmup pants.

"Darrell Benson?"

He nodded. The thing that crossed his face was gone so quickly that Worth almost missed it. The FBI was on the doorstep. No, his wife LaDona was never coming home. It took longer than six weeks to learn that lesson.

Worth half-listened to Falkner introducing herself, to Benson inviting them in. The living room was Target and IKEA and a little Pier One, plus a corner hutch that might be an heirloom. It was a comfortable room, one you could host the playoff game party in. The television was the tube variety, and must have required some determined carrying. She smelled cooking smells, and the jasmine through the screen door.

"I know this will be difficult for you," Falkner said. "But we'd like to ask you a few questions about your wife."

Benson's face stiffened. "You think she did something wrong?"

"No, sir, not at all. We're investigating the possibility that someone caused her death--that someone might have attacked her and several other people in the same way. In cases like this, we study the deceased, to see if they have anything in common. It can tell us a lot about the kind of person who might harm them."

Worth watched Benson as Falkner spoke, watched him relax, watched him moving toward trust. Falkner's voice was as perfect a thing as Brady's face--resonant, flexible, conveying more than the words themselves.

"You mean like one of those poisoned-Tylenol deals?"

Falkner showed nothing but concern. "We can't discuss that yet, Mr. Benson. The investigation is in the early stages."

Motion at the corner of Worth's vision. She turned to find a little boy peering around what must be the door to the kitchen. He wore a red-and-blue striped rugby shirt and clutched a red plastic race car to his chest as if it were a teddy bear. One sneaker was in the process of coming untied. About five--he would be the older son.

Benson saw him, too. "Vaughn? You finish your sandwich?"

The boy nodded.

"Your brother still sleeping?"

Again a nod. The boy's eyes slid over Falkner and Worth, then away.

"My son, Vaughn," Benson said, and held out one arm. Vaughn scurried into it and hid his face against his father's body, and Benson's extended arm

curled around him. "Come on, now, say hello. You know how to be with company."

Vaughn shook his head. Benson pressed his lips together and brushed his fingers over Vaughn's hair.

Vaughn had learned company manners. Then his mother died. Now both he and his father were struggling to remember how to be with company.

They sat in the living room while Falkner took Benson's statement. LaDona Benson was well-liked, friendly. She hadn't been sick at or just before the time she died. She hadn't seemed nervous or upset, and hadn't mentioned meeting anyone new, particularly anyone who worried or frightened her.

"She called me from work that day," Benson said, staring out the front window. "She said she was stopping at the market on the way home, and did I want something." His eyes and mouth closed tight; then he recovered. You got better at it with practice.

"Would you mind if we looked at her things, at the rest of the house?" When Benson looked startled, Falkner added, "It could help. We won't be searching, only observing things already in sight."

He considered it. Worth would have, too, if strangers with badges wanted to walk through her house without a search warrant. Easy to say "We're not looking for evidence of wrongdoing." But it would be foolish not to wonder if they might, anyway.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll go wake up Ray."

Worth's throat ached as they moved from room to room. Every corner had life in it, planned days, a future. Next to the little TV in the bedroom, three exercise videos and a pair of two-pound hand weights. Makeup in a rack on the dresser. Hair shine serum and a stretch bead bracelet on the shelf above the sink, lightly filmed with dust.

"No aerosols," Worth said aloud.

Falkner, at the open closet, turned and raised her eyebrows.

"No hairspray, spray deodorants, or spray cologne. In fact, no cologne or aftershave."

"Hmm. Come here and tell me what you get."

LaDona Benson's clothes hung on the left side of the closet, divided by category. Office clothes, knockaround clothes, party clothes. The last included a bright flowered slip dress, and an orange-and-white sundress with the tag still on. "Borderline OCD?"

An almost-smile bumped Falkner's lips askew. "Smell."

Cigarette smoke. Not a lot, but enough to have penetrated any clothes that required dry cleaning and hadn't had it yet.

"Huh. But no ashtrays. No smell in the house in general." Worth sniffed the air of the bedroom to double-check. "She didn't smoke at home."

"Or she did, and it's dissipated."

Worth shook her head. "Even in six weeks--it would take carpet shampoo and a lot of laundering. Unless her husband wanted to wash that part of her away?"

"Let's finish the circuit."

There was less of LaDona Benson around the kitchen; Benson had to go on feeding his kids, even if he couldn't do it the way he used to, or the way his wife had.

Worth went to the phone on the kitchen counter, looking for notes or numbers. On the counter beside it was a metered-dose inhaler.

"Eureka."

Falkner came up behind her, and Worth pointed.

"LaDona Benson had asthma?"

Worth picked up the inhaler and shook her head. "See the tube on the end? That's an asthma spacer. Inhaler sequence can be hard for little kids to master. The spacer mixes the bronchodilator with air in the tube, so a child can inhale the correct dose even without getting the sequence down."

"So no aerosols, no perfumes. And she didn't smoke at home."

Worth looked up to find Vaughn in the hall, hugging the wall and watching. She squatted down and held out the inhaler. "Hi, Vaughn. My name is Daphne. This is yours, huh?"

He dropped his eyes and nodded.

"These can be tricky to use. Like a really hard video game. Was it hard to learn?"

He shrugged.

"Have you had it a long time?"

Vaughn looked up, shook his head. "I had to go to the hospital."

"Did you go in an ambulance?"

"Yeah."

"I used to drive an ambulance. It was fun, but it was scary, too, because the people I was driving needed help. Were you scared?"

Vaughn nodded, staring at her. "I couldn't breathe."

"That would have scared me, too. You know to keep this with you all the time?"

Vaughn nodded again, solemn with responsibility. Another thing to make Worth's throat hurt.

"Do you remember the name of the hospital you went to?"

He didn't, so they found Benson, sitting in the living room with his three-year-old son on his lap. "Mr. Benson," Falkner said, "How long has Vaughn had asthma?"

"We only found out first of the year. We went to the Rose Parade, and he was running around looking at the floats. And then that night he was coughing, and he couldn't breathe right, and we called 911."

"What hospital was he treated at?"

"In Burbank, the big one by the 134. Holy Cross."

Worth managed, barely, not to shoot a look at Falkner. "Was he treated in the ER and released, or did they keep him overnight?"

"Overnight. They let LaDona stay with him. Then he had another trip, end of the month. He forgot his medicine at daycare, and we had to get him some help."

"Holy Cross again?" Falkner asked.

"Yeah."

"Did your wife smoke?" Worth asked. It was the thing you took for granted that tripped you up, after all.

Benson looked startled. "She never smoked much. But after Vaughn got sick she didn't smoke at home. She was trying to quit." His throat worked, a hard swallow, and he looked down when his younger son yanked on his wristwatch.

Falkner said the polite things that led to getting them out the door and restoring Benson's privacy. The scent of jasmine followed them down the walk.

"It could be coincidence," Worth offered once they were out of earshot of the house.

Falkner flexed her neck and shoulders and winced. "You heard Reyes on the subject. A victim who dies of asphyxiation, whose child has a respiratory illness and is treated at the same hospital where another victim dies in the parking lot."

Worth bit the inside of her lip. Coincidence was possible; it just wasn't *likely*. "Put that way, it almost sounds obvious. But if the medical examiner hadn't spotted a pattern... There'd be more and more LaDona Bensons."

Falkner unlocked the driver's door. "We were lucky this time."

Lucky. "The Bensons weren't. And the other four families."

Falkner stood still in the open car door. "Go on."

Oh, God, she should shut up. But it was too late now. "We count on luck. And five people die. We explain to local law enforcement what they're looking for without telling them what they're looking for, and nobody's sure when to blow the whistle, and by the time the unit gets here there's a trail of bodies. That's how it works, right?"

"It still bothers you, doesn't it?"

Worth opened her mouth. *Tone it down, girl*. She changed, *God damn right* to "It bothers me that we don't tell them. That we cover up."

"That we covered up after the incident you witnessed."

Falkner's voice and face were calm, but Worth felt it like a blow to the throat. You buried things, you sank them in the lake of the past. But they bobbed to the surface.

Quick thinking, everyone had said to her afterward. The man who'd shown his FBI credentials and taken pity on her and explained a little of what had just happened, had said it. But really, she'd been lucky. Vin and Josh hadn't been.

She was angry. She must have been angry for a long time. She pressed her hands hard against the side of the car, low down out of Falkner's line of sight, until the joints hurt. A deep breath, so she wouldn't *sound* angry. "If we'd been warned what could happen, we'd have been more careful. The guys I worked with might still be alive."

"But you know why we do it," said Falkner. She was relentlessly calm.

"I know why we *say* we do."

"What happens when the general public looks at any schizophrenic, any shell-shocked homeless vet, any kid with impulse control problems, anyone whose particular variety of strange they don't get, and sees *anomaly*? And what happens when we tell them we don't know what the anomaly is, or how to reverse the effects? And that, given the available knowledge and resources, they may not be able to do anything about it except shoot the host down like a rabid dog?"

"I understand that--"

"Good. Now *picture* it. Then imagine how many ambulance crews, knowing those things, would think twice before they stepped in to help a victim, for fear it might be a monster in disguise."

In the rattle of thoughts in Worth's head, one came clear: *She knew she would need to say this to me.* It shamed her. "I'm sorry. You're right."

"No, I'm doing the best I can with what I've got. We all are. Whether we're right remains to be seen." Falkner opened the door on her side. "We should go. Before the neighbors call to report suspicious loitering." She slid into the driver's seat, out of Worth's view.

Giving Worth a private moment. She took another breath and let it out slowly. *I could do worse than grow up to be Esther Falkner*.

She got in and fastened her belt, while Falkner started the car. "What's our next step?"

"Sic Hafidha on the medical records. And see what the rest of the team comes up with." Falkner glanced over at Worth. "You did good work in there."

Encouraging the Rookie. Worth clutched at it, even knowing what it was. "Thanks."

Falkner turned into traffic on Lankershim and said, "How would you describe yourself on the job?"

Hopeless. Awkward. Inclined to quarrel with superiors, apparently. "Competent?" Worth said. It sounded like overstatement.

Falkner watched traffic, her face unchanging. Four blocks later, she pulled to the curb along a row of brick storefronts and opened the driver's door.

"What are we--"

"Feeding the troops." Falkner jerked her head at the window stenciled *Araz Bakery*. "Everybody loves a good quartermaster."

*

Across the street from the late James Cookson's apartment building, a film crew was shooting. The street where Brady would have parked was filled with grip trucks, wardrobe trailers, and dressing rooms. Power cables looped down the sidewalk like orderly boa constrictors. Scaffolding climbed a gray-block office building and pointed a pair of instruments, like nosy neighbors, in a window to make dawn, or sunset, or whatever the sun itself wasn't up to providing.

In the passenger seat, Chaz craned his neck, which was always a sight. "Wonder what that's like? To wake up and find a movie set in your front yard?"

"No unexpected weirdness in Vegas?"

Chaz's chin came up and his eyelids dropped halfway. Armor. Brady wondered why. "It's mostly quarantined. Fremont Street and the Strip."

"If I'd grown up in Vegas, maybe I could beat you at poker."

Chaz popped his seatbelt and smiled kindly. "Nah."

Better, Brady thought, as they went in search of the manager.

The manager looked about 90, and Brady worried about him on the outside stairs to the second floor. But he arrived intact and unlocked the door. "Tell me when you're done. I get shit from the family if there's anything missing." The old guy ran his hand through the half-dozen hairs he had left. "Though so far there's just the *shiksa*."

"A girlfriend?" Chaz asked.

"She comes over and they fight. Probably they go to her place and fight, too. Is that what you do with your girlfriend?"

Chaz was still his wintertime unhealthy yellow-gray, so Brady could see the blood climb up his neck to his face. "Do you know her name?" Brady asked the manager.

"And phone number, and address. Like I say, she thinks she's next of kin." The old man crept back down the stairs.

When Brady opened the apartment door, stale air stinking of old cigarettes and old beer and old laundry and a faint dumpster smell of ripe kitchen trash bloomed out onto the balcony. The room beyond the door felt empty. He noted the presence and weight of the holster at his belt anyway; second nature, now. But he was pleased when Chaz unbuttoned his jacket to have access to his own.

On Chaz's belt, on the side opposite the holster, was an open-topped case. And it wasn't for a graphing calculator.

"What's that?" Brady said, though he knew.

Chaz looked past him into the apartment, expressionless. "Taser. Reyes's idea."

Of course it was. Shit. And he gave it to Chaz because Chaz was the only person on the team who would consider something as stupid as using it. Brady must have taken a little too long to respond; Chaz's gaze swiveled around to him and stayed there, like an owl examining the landscape.

So Brady said, "I'm not going to die for Reyes's bring-'em-back-alive campaign. You do as you please. But if you fail to pull your weapon and

someone else hurts for it, believe me, there will be no hole deep enough to bury either the investigation or you."

Chaz's mouth skewed, as if he was biting the inside of his lip. "Fair enough," he said.

It seemed Chaz, like Reyes, didn't scare easy. Brady wasn't sure that was comforting.

He stepped into the apartment with Chaz behind him. They didn't close the door--it wasn't an atmosphere you wanted to be closed in with.

A vinyl sofa from Goodwill, a blanket up for a window covering (nothing said "slum" like an apartment building with blankets in the windows), a 19 inch TV with an old cable box on top. Three ashtrays, mostly full. At some point one had fallen and dumped its contents behind the TV stand and never been swept up after.

There was an empty beer can and a dirty plate on the coffee table. Chaz popped a lime-green nitrile glove out of his pocket, stretched it onto his long, knuckly hand, picked up the can, and shook it. "Cigarette butt," he said, uninflected.

"You knew there would be." Under the *TV Guide* Brady saw the edge of an envelope from a photo developer. He put on a glove of his own and slid it out. Five prints--Cookson, less sullen than in the photo the team had, his arm around a wide-smiling, full-bodied redhead, indoors at what looked like a car show. Brady shook the negatives out of the envelope, held them to the light. A 24-exposure roll. "So where are the other nineteen prints?"

They found them by the bed. They featured the redhead, and were the sort of photos one kept in the bedroom. Chaz raised his eyebrows. "Extroverted."

Brady laughed. It was easier to laugh when you suspected being alive wouldn't have improved the victim.

The bathroom was grubby, but free of prescription meds, illegal substances, or any parole-violating or otherwise potentially toxic items. The kitchen was bleak: an open box of cereal, Hungry Man canned soup, an opened carton of cigarettes, a half-gallon of milk gone sour, and the remains of a twelve-pack of Bud. Brady decided to leave the trash for the CSIs.

Chaz began to open drawers. "Hey," he said. He held up a checkbook.

"Funny place to keep it."

Chaz shrugged. "Cookson doesn't--didn't have a computer. He'd write checks for bills and rent." He flipped open the register and began to work backward. "Huh. $2562 to Bonnie Gilberti, two days before he died."

"That's a chunk of change for a guy who tends bar."

"The girlfriend?"

"Let's go ask the mummified Mr. Rogers."

According to the manager, Bonnie Gilberti was, indeed, the girlfriend. He gave them her address.

Gilberti lived in an atrium apartment building in a mixed-use neighborhood wedged between the Burbank airport and the rail line, within hearing of the constant rumble of I-5. When they knocked on her door, she opened it, listened to what they'd come for in silence, then turned and walked back into the apartment, leaving them to come in and close the door.

Chaz rolled his eyes at Brady like a wary dog. Brady shrugged, and followed Gilberti into her kitchen.

In as far as he could, at least, and Chaz sidled in after him. It was a slot of room with shrunken appliances, a shallow, dented single-bowl sink, and no window. Gilberti cranked the hot water handle on the faucet and started--or resumed--washing dishes.

Brady thought Gilberti might have been pretty in high school. She'd frowned a lot since then, and stayed up too late, and worked too hard. His mother would have said she looked "peaked," a word with two syllables that balanced sympathy and superiority in a very small space.

"Jim fucked up, he did time. I know that. And then he turned his life around." Gilberti swept clean plates out of the sink drainer and smacked them on a stack of others in the cheap cupboards. Chaz flinched at the sound. Brady could see the pulse jump in his neck and the muscles in his jaw stand out. What in this sad, cluttered little apartment could wind him so tight? "But it was an accident, him dying. He wasn't on any shit, and he wasn't into anything. So you can go do real F-B-fucking-I shit now."

They'd have to tell Bostwick he wasn't alone in his opinion. "Did Mr. Cookson have any enemies?" Brady asked.

She turned from the sink, her mouth an O of pearlescent lipstick. "God, dozens."

Chaz's eyebrows rose.

"Well, what did you think? He loses his temper. He takes a poke at somebody. Hello, not Mother Damn Theresa. His boss fucking hates...hated him." The muscles pinched around her eyes and she turned back to the sink.

Brady watched Chaz scan and catalog the kitchen. He'd get a download on that once they left. "Ms. Gilberti, Cookson wrote you a check two days before he died. For $2562."

She looked blank. "Oh! Yeah, so I could sign it over to the hospital. I got no insurance, and I had to pay the hospital."

"Hospital?" You could almost see Chaz's ears point, like a dog hearing a can opener. "You've been sick?"

Gilberti's face closed up so fast Brady could hear it slam. "No, I just like to go to the hospital."

"Sorry." Chaz wilted visibly. "Dumb question."

Next time, gag Chaz, Brady thought, and gathered himself to take the conversation back.

But Chaz beat him to it. "It's just... There's been a series of weird deaths, and Mr. Cookson's is one of them. So we're looking for connections. One of the other deaths happened in a hospital parking lot, so..." Chaz shrugged.

"Ohmygod," Gilberti whispered.

Well, well. Witness was off-guard, alarmed, softened up. Maybe an accident, or maybe the kid knew a thing or two.

"What hospital did you go to?" Brady asked.

"Holy Cross--is that where the other guy died?"

Chaz shrugged and did the absurd thing with his mouth. "Not at liberty to say."

"Ohmygod."

"It's all right, ma'am. You're not in danger." Though Brady had no proof of that.

Chaz's gaze wandered vaguely across the kitchen again. "What did you go to the hospital for?"

Gilberti scowled at Chaz. "Something that's not your damned business."

Well, the bloom was off *that* rose.

Brady wound up the visit with *thank you* and *you've been an enormous help* and got them both down to the building parking lot unscathed.

"What next?" Chaz asked, sliding onto the bench seat of the car and buckling up. Brady thought he was working a little too hard to look at his hands, his knees, the dashboard, and the view out the windshield.

"The bar where Cookson worked. I don't think we'll get anything more than confirmation that he was a son of a bitch, but I'd like to see where he died." Brady started the car.

Chaz studied the view a little longer before he said, "She had eight different nutritional supplements on the counter. The bottles were over half full. Either she was diagnosed with a metabolic disorder, or she's pregnant. The open box of Saltines suggests the latter."

"Huh." Nice job. Would Chaz object to being told so? One way to find out. "Nice job."

Chaz's gaze bounced up to Brady, zipped away again. He straightened against the seat back, and the twitchy grimace that might be a smile shot across his face and was gone.

*

Its head has been underwater for--how long? And it still struggles. It still takes all her weight to hold it down.

Not "it"--host and parasite, and the host is a human being, with a name and a past. But the unnatural strength makes an It of the thing beneath her.

And he still hasn't taken a breath. Injury to brain cells after four minutes. Irreversible brain damage in seven.

Act IV

The space Bostwick had allotted the team was a small meeting room with a long folding table and no windows. Lau wanted to tell him it felt just like home.

She'd set up her laptop and the portable printer on a metal cabinet against one wall and liberated an enormous whiteboard from a back room at the copshop. When Worth and Falkner came in, Reyes was pulling hypothetically-inaccessible medical records off the printer. (Thank you, Hafidha.) Lau was making columns on the whiteboard, one for each victim and one for their killer. That last one was blank, and it bugged her.

The smell of dry-erase marker always made her think of murder and frustration.

Falkner set a brown paper grocery bag lightly marked with grease spots on the table. Worth did the same with the one she carried.

"The proprietor says hello," Falkner told her. "I got the feeling he didn't ordinarily bake these this late in the day." She asked a question with her eyebrows.

Lau gave her a one-palm-up shrug. "I went to school with his son. Eight cheese-and-pepper *beoreks*, six cheese, and a dozen *mamoul*?"

"It's a lot of food," Worth ventured.

"Mmm," said Falkner.

Reyes brought his printouts to the table. "With pepper?"

"That bag." Falkner pointed. "You talked to Echeverria's mother?"

"And the waiter at Stuben's Deli." Reyes pulled out one of the foot-long stuffed breads. Warm yeast smell made Lau's mouth water.

"Echeverria went there to meet her ex," Lau said. "It being about halfway and a public place, thus neutral ground. Not what you'd call an amicable divorce."

Reyes snorted.

The door opened, and Brady stepped in. Lau felt her professional half-smile expand. "Hey, you."

"Back atcha." He lifted one of the metal folding chairs away from the table one-handed, spun it 180 degrees, and set it down. Then he straddled it, let it take his weight gradually, and folded his arms over the chair back.

Lau would bet he'd lost count of the metal folding chairs he'd killed.

Chaz slid through the door with a half-gallon jug of orange juice. "Coffee's still brewing," he sighed.

"Dinner," Falkner said, pointing a thumb at the bags.

In Chaz's face, the sun broke from behind a cloud.

"Talk while you eat," Reyes ordered.

Lau handed the bags around. Chaz took two to start with. Brady, Lau knew, would eat two, but he'd wait on the second one to see what was left. She cut a pepper loaf in half for herself and carried it with her to the whiteboard.

"According to her mother," she said, "Echeverria was meeting her ex-husband to discuss their daughter, and money, in that order. Specifically, increased child support, since the daughter had just been diagnosed with a heart ailment, and Echeverria's insurance wouldn't cover all the care."

"Don't tell me. Diagnosed at Holy Cross Medical Center," Falkner said.

"Oh, good," said Reyes, "it wasn't just us. What have you got?"

Falkner nodded to Worth.

Worth swallowed fast and cleared her throat. "LaDona Benson's son was diagnosed with asthma in early January, at Holy Cross. He went back to the ER there--" she fished her Palm out of her pocket to check, "--three days before Benson's death."

Lau started filling in Benson's column on the whiteboard.

"Any signs that Benson was nervous or afraid?" asked Reyes.

Falkner shook her head. "Well-liked, happy, successful at work."

"The waiter at the deli described Echeverria as nervous. She shredded her napkin, ordered a sandwich and picked it apart without eating it. Then she

went to the women's bathroom."

"Where was the ex-husband?" Brady asked.

"In transit, with an alibi. He parked in a garage down the street, and the attendant remembers him."

"Probably half a dozen panhandlers as well, if we could find the right ones," Lau added. "Police pushed them off Hollywood and Sunset for the tourists, but they have to go somewhere. That seems to be one of the spots."

"So, was she nervous about seeing her ex, or something else?" Falkner asked the air.

Lau raised one shoulder; the universal sign for *No clue*. "She was found in the stall with the door latched. Didn't seem to have used the toilet, though." Lau played that out in her head again. Into the restroom, and a stall...but then what? If you weren't there to pee or shoot up--and there'd been no evidence of drugs--why stand around in a bathroom stall?

"Any idea how long she was in there?" Worth asked.

"Nope. The killer might have followed her. Or been there ahead of her."

"Female, then?" Falkner stretched in her chair.

"Unless the gamma doesn't require proximity to the victims," Reyes said.

"Cookson also had a Holy Cross connection," Brady said. "His girlfriend went to the ER there two days before he dropped dead at work. Chaz thinks she's pregnant."

Everyone looked at Chaz. He was most of the way through his third roll, and his mouth was full, but he nodded.

Lau noted the pregnancy on the whiteboard. Reyes frowned. "Hospital employee, or patient. We need the mechanism for the asphyxiations. Have we heard from Frost?"

Lau looked back over her shoulder, as if it were a casual gesture. "Worth? If she gets technical, you'll at least have a chance of following the conversation."

"Will do. Give me the number?"

Lau did, and watched Worth slip behind Brady and step into the hall with her phone.

Brady tucked his chin and frowned at Lau. She gave him back a shot of wide-eyed innocence. Brady sighed and turned to the whiteboard. "What about the kid connection?" he asked.

Lau shook her head. "Morro didn't have kids. Gerianne Sussman didn't, either."

Chaz swallowed heroically. "Neither did Cookson, until we talked to his girlfriend."

It took a moment to register. Lau was relieved to see that was true for everyone else, too.

Falkner pulled out her phone and pushed two buttons.

"About time you called," Hafidha's voice declared. "This place echoes like hell."

"Hafidha, we've connected three victims to Holy Cross Hospital through the ER, via children or a pregnancy. Comb the records for Alonso Morro and Gerianne Sussman again, will you? Any connection to children admitted to the Holy Cross Emergency Department."

"I was hoping for tough."

"Best I've got." Falkner looked serenely unamused. Lau thought she was amused, anyway.

"Hold the line?"

"Will do."

Worth stepped back in from the hall and shook her head. "Dr. Frost's voice mail."

Lau avoided looking at Brady. "She won't take long to call back."

Reyes rubbed his eyes. "Even narrowing the vector down to the hospital, we still have thousands of suspects."

Lau's laptop chirped.

"Okay, gang," Hafidha said through Falkner's phone. "I've sent you files. Unfortunately, the Morros remain childless no matter what I do."

"So much for the kid connection," Brady grumbled.

"However," Hafidha continued, and even on speaker Lau could hear the hello-not-done-yet inflection, "when Ms. Sussman remarried, she picked a widower, John Bianchi, with three kids. And lo, eleven-year-old Brian Bianchi was admitted to the Holy Cross emergency room with pneumonia. The day before Sussman died in the parking lot." Hafidha sounded grim when she added, "He's not doing well, by the way."

Chaz froze with the jug of orange juice halfway to his mouth. "Did Sussman smoke?"

Reyes's head swiveled. "What?"

"Benson did," Worth said.

"So did Cookson." Chaz leaned forward, eyes wide. "That's why he was outside during working hours. Smoke break. That's why they were all outdoors. No smoking indoors in California in public places. Not even bars."

"Hang on," Hafidha said. "First autopsy on Sussman... Tar and smoke particles in the lung tissue. Ruled out as cause of death. Still, smoker."

Lau looked at the whiteboard again. "One case of asthma, one of pneumonia, and a heart problem...which could be secondhand-smoke related."

"Sussman was at the hospital with her stepson--" Falkner said.

Chaz finished, "--and she went out for a cigarette."

Brady nodded toward the board. "Echeverria wasn't outdoors."

Chaz shook his head hard enough to make his hair flop. "Tough neighborhood--street people, panhandlers. A woman by herself. And she was nervous, jittery--"

"Nicotine fit," Worth burst out. Chaz shot her a grateful look. It was as if there were too many words in his throat, and he needed more people to help him say them. "She went to the bathroom for a smoke, because she didn't feel safe outside."

"That's irony," Lau growled. "So we're looking for someone with a mad on for smokers?"

Reyes pursed his lips. "Breathing problems themselves?"

"The crack the anomaly got through," Falkner said.

"The crack?" Worth said. She looked like a spectator at a tennis match.

"Stressors apply here, just as they do with other serial crimes." Reyes sounded like a lecturer with sixty seconds before the end of class. "That could be the weakness that allowed the anomaly a foothold."

"Like your immune system failing to protect you from a cold virus when you're tired," Lau added.

Hafidha's voice broke in. "Holy Cross has a major pulmonary unit, *compadres*."

"We'll start there." Reyes left his chair and swept his jacket off the back.

*

Like an emergency response crew, the team could go from settled to swift almost before Worth could register the change. Her heart rate bumped up as Reyes gave orders. "Chaz, Worth, I want you to interview Alonso Morro's wife. Morro's the only victim without a connection to the hospital. If you can find one, it'll help us narrow this down."

Chaz nodded. His face had gone stiff again; the intensity he'd had leaning across the table was burned out or boxed in.

"Worth, when Frost calls, phone the results to Lau. The rest of us will go to the hospital. Brady, Falkner, check with the staff for long-term patients with respiratory illnesses, dates of admission, and friends or relatives who visit regularly. Lau and I will hit Human Resources and study the staff."

"Yell if you need me," Gates said.

"Thank you, Hafidha." Falkner disconnected.

Before Worth could say anything, the hospital-bound team were out the door, all but Lau. So to Lau, she said, "Good luck."

Lau smiled. "Same to you." And she was gone, too.

Chaz swallowed the last of his--fourth?--sandwich, chugged the dregs of the orange juice, and wiped his mouth and fingers with a napkin. "I'll drive."

"Good. I won't feel guilty about answering the phone." She watched him toss the napkin and pick up his backpack. His gaze stayed low, his chin tucked, his shoulders hunched. "Is it me?"

He raised his head sharply. "What?"

"Reyes paired us up on this interview, and you sort of...toggled off. I wondered if I'd done something."

"Oh. No, it's all good." He smiled without showing the crooked front teeth.

It wasn't all good, but if he didn't want to talk there was nothing she could do. She stood up and slung her messenger bag over her shoulder.

The bakery bag was empty. Not too much food, after all.

Worth buttoned her suit jacket to cover her holster. Chaz, she noticed, hadn't ever unbuttoned his. Well, he probably wouldn't need to get at his gun without warning in a police station.

Probably.

Outside, the western sky was pinkish-orange with sunset and haze. The dark Crown Victoria was easy to find among the black-and-whites in the parking lot. Chaz unlocked the doors with his whole attention. Then he said, "It really *isn't* you."

"It's okay. I mean, if it's not me, it's none of my business, right?"

Chaz got behind the wheel, so she did, too. *It's Los Angeles*, Worth thought. *All significant conversations happen in and around cars.*

He made a long, flat line of his mouth. "It's not that it's not your business." He frowned ferociously out the windshield and found the ignition by feel. "It's just--they're on their way to the place voted most likely to harbor a gamma." The engine caught with a roar; he gave the gas an extra jab before he put it in gear and the acceleration bounced Worth backwards. "And Reyes sends us to interview the victim's wife."

Worth hadn't thought of it that way. It embarrassed her that she hadn't. "You crave a life of danger?"

The tires squealed a little as he turned onto the street. "Isn't that what we're supposed to have?"

For the last year, he'd been on a desk. Brady doubted him, Worth knew. Brady wouldn't have said so, but Chaz would spot it, and know Brady wouldn't be the only one. She couldn't think of anything to say that she'd want to hear in his place.

He turned, drove another block, and said, "Every time they go out, they take a risk. It's not right that I don't. I can't sit back and not do the job, when they do it every day."

She remembered what she'd heard outside the briefing room, between Reyes and Falkner. What was right, and what was fair. Even Reyes doubted. Chaz would know that, too. "You're doing the job."

And so was she. Wasn't she? He was right: Reyes had sent the new kids out of the line of fire. They had training and useful skills and on-paper rank, but they weren't part of the pack.

He shrugged and jounced them over a speed bump. "Yeah. Like I said. It's all good."

She could leave it there, let him banish the subject. Maybe he was done with it. But she wasn't. "I-- Look, I'm sorry if this is a terrible thing to say, but I'm glad I'm not alone. Except I am, because they *know* you. I don't have any history here. But at least I don't have to be the only new face at the party."

He gave her a slanting, sideways look.

Way to rub it in, Daphne. "God, it *was* a terrible thing to say. Never mind. I just--"

"You're serious." His voice said, *You're not serious.*

"What?"

"You came in from Down the Hall. Nobody's going to think you're not qualified. When Reyes left us behind, I figured you were assigned babysitting duty."

"Tell that to SSA Brady."

"Brady gave you the man-enough routine?" Chaz startled her by grinning. "Jesus. Nothing short of a one-handed pushup will win that guy's love."

"Can you do one? We could try it and see." She squeezed down the bubble of panicky laughter the picture produced. Maybe in the aisle next to Brady's desk.

"Hah. Competing for favor is beneath me." He took the inside line on a corner without regard for lanes. But it was a residential street, and quiet.

"Does that mean you can't?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Show me yours first."

She smiled at him. It felt good. It felt like the first actual unconsidered smile she'd worn in days.

They found the Morro house, a little stuccoed Cape Cod, and Chaz rang the bell. Worth heard something inside, at the back of the house. They waited, looked at each other, and Chaz rang again.

After a moment Worth heard light, running steps. Someone struggled with the knob from inside. And a little girl opened the door.

She was maybe eight, with big dark eyes in a sandy-brown face with wide, flat *Indio* cheekbones. She wore red cropped pants and a candycane-striped ruffled top. She stared up in silence at Chaz as if he were a national monument.

Chaz stared back, startled, the color fading out of his face.

"Adelita!" a woman called from inside. "*¿Quien es, gatita?*"

"*Un hombre y una mujér*," the girl said, as if that explained everything. She ran back down the dark hall into the house.

"Are you okay?" Worth asked Chaz.

"Yeah." he blinked. "Fine."

A tall, deep-bosomed Hispanic woman came down the hall. Adelita followed. "*¿Sí?*"

"Mrs. Morro?" Worth said. "I'm Special Agent Worth, from the FBI. We're following up on the death of your husband--"

"This isn't your daughter," Chaz blurted.

"No. She's my niece, Alonso's sister's little one." Mrs. Morro frowned, with her eyebrows and mouth at once. "Her mama is in drug rehab. We're...I'm looking after her." She looked back over her shoulder and dropped her voice. "For all I care, she don't ever have to come out."

Chaz rocked back a little. "Your niece has been seen at Holy Cross Medical Center?"

Mrs. Morro gave him a narrow-eyed stare. "She's not an illegal. She's entitled to treatment."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Was it a respiratory illness?" Worth asked.

"Bronchitis. She gets it bad."

"Did--was it your husband who took her to the ER?"

Morro's frown was less warning and more alarmed now. "Yeah. I met him there, then I stayed with Adela while he took the bus...took the bus to work. Only--" She pressed her lips tight and threw her head back, and her body swelled with her breathing.

"It's all right," Worth said, trying not to sound too gentle. Too gentle made it hurt more. "Mrs. Morro, did your husband smoke?"

Morro looked at Worth as if she could see the simpler past through the outline of her body. "Yes, he did."

Worth met Chaz's eyes. *Smokers and kids*, she thought. *Five for five.*

"Mrs. Morro, thank you for your time. That's all we need." Worth stepped off the porch and headed for the car with Chaz close behind. Open a wound and walk away--but they had to do it. They just didn't have to feel good about it.

Worth's phone buzzed halfway to the car. She flipped it open.

"Frost," said the level female voice, the one on the voice mailbox.

"Hi! This is Daph--"

"I know. You left your name and number."

It was hard to tell if Frost was annoyed, or rushed, or just stating the obvious: her voice held no emotion. "Thank you for--"

"Do you still want the results of my autopsy on the victim?"

"I-- Yes?"

"The interior of the subject's airway shows no tissue damage that might have been caused by a foreign object. The original autopsy was unclear on that; it stated that there was no object present, but didn't mention whether one might have been introduced and removed *post mortem*."

That had the kind of obsessive thoroughness Worth was used to in pathologists. "But that means--"

"Nothing at all, Agent Worth. It's merely the absence of evidence."

"I guess-- No, ma'am. Doctor."

"I found multiple microscopic tears in the muscle of the tongue, however."

Tears in muscle tissue, like the tiny tears that opened in the muscles of bodybuilders straining against a weight. "She strangled on her own tongue *while conscious?*"

A moment of silence on the phone. "More significantly, she struggled against strangling on her own tongue."

"Mechanical blockage of the airway. With her tongue. The gamma controlled the muscle itself?"

"That appears to be the case." For the first time, Worth heard emotion in Dr. Frost's voice: a chilly, distant disapproval. "Control of the autonomic nervous system through the brain stem would have been more direct and efficient. The best way to cause asphyxiation is to turn off the involuntary impulse to breathe."

Worth shivered. That *would* be the best way. A gamma who did that would leave no evidence for the police or the pathologist. Just a trail of people who stopped breathing. *Don't give them any ideas.* "But there would have been less struggling?"

"Done properly, there would be none at all."

The tone with which Frost said "properly" was alarming.

"But that would assume the person responsible knew the neurophysiology of respiration," Frost continued.

"Wait--so someone with a background in respiratory physiology--a doctor, a nurse, an LPN--would have just gone to the source? But a mechanical cause... That could be someone with practical experience but less training. Unless it's someone with a lot of training who wants it to look--"

"My area of expertise is pathology, Agent Worth. The psychology is your responsibility."

There was such a lack of emotion in those two sentences that Worth thought she might get hypothermia just from listening. "Yes, ma'am. No."

"Do you have any other questions for me?"

"No. No, ma'am."

"Good. Good-bye, Agent Worth."

And the connection was silent.

Worth leaned on the car to catch her breath. Across the hood Chaz watched, head canted, eyebrows raised, wearing the long, flat grin that exaggerated his chin.

"What?" Worth said.

"I'll tell Lau you survived your initiation."

"Wha-- Son of a bitch, that was on *purpose*?"

"You'd have to talk to her sooner or later."

"Jesus!" She recalled the flat, steady voice on the phone and shook herself like a wet dog to break the spell. "So...does she *look* like that?"

"Oh, no. Cozy. Like a vampire nursery school teacher."

"Gah."

"Get in. You can phone Lau with the report while I get us to Burbank."

Act V

Falkner winced as the big purple Ford plunged into the Emergency Department parking area and stopped like a cow pony. Chaz swung out the driver's side: long skinny feet, quarter mile of legs, brown hair falling across his sallow face and brushing his gapping shirt collar, elbows jutting like compasses.

A moment later Worth pulled herself up out of the passenger seat and leaned on the roof. "Chaz, I used to drive an *ambulance*," she said, with the threat of a squeak in the last word.

Chaz smiled and blinked like a happy cat. "So?"

"I didn't drive it like *that*."

"Oh, come on. If the car ahead of you in the next lane is doing 68 miles an hour, and the car behind him is doing 75, and you're doing 71, and a Ford Crown Victoria is 212 inches bumper to bumper, you can figure out how much room you need to change lanes in."

"Gah. What do you factor in for the heart attacks of the other two drivers?"

Chaz snorted that one away and loped up the ramp to Falkner. "Lau got Daphne's call?"

Falkner noted the name without comment. "The one with the panicky indrawn breaths?"

Chaz frowned. "I didn't run into anything, and nothing ran into us."

"That," Falkner sighed, "is not necessarily the point of the exercise."

Worth arrived at his shoulder. "But do we have a profile?"

"Certified nurse's assistant or nursing student under supervision, working in pediatric ER, may have a respiratory illness or have lost a child or young relative to a respiratory disorder, or both. Has probably spoken out against smokers, especially parents who smoke, and has quarreled with coworkers who smoke. Impatient, argues with nursing directives, doesn't take criticism well. He--or she--is supremely confident in his own judgment, and justifies what he or she does in terms of removing children from life-threatening situations." She heard Reyes's phrasings coming out her mouth. Well, why not? He led this team for a reason.

"She thinks she's a persecuted hero," Worth said.

"It could be a man."

"Depends on how close the gamma has to be to make the trick work," said Chaz.

Falkner heard the rare confidence in his voice. He'd forgotten himself in the puzzle. "How so?"

"Parking lots are classic danger zones for women alone. LaDona Benson and Gerianne Sussman died next to their cars. If a strange male had approached, they'd have bolted."

"But a woman could have walked right up to them," Worth finished. "Plus, there's Cristina Echeverria in the women's bathroom."

Falkner looked from Chaz's face to Worth's, wildly different, matched in the flush of excitement. *Cool them off. They're too wired up to be careful.* But they were right. They'd filled in the pieces of the profile. And they needed to prove themselves. "We're interviewing staff in the ER and in Pediatrics and in the pulmonary department. But we're keeping a low profile. If the gamma knows we're close, he--*she*--may bolt. Be very damned careful, and if you flush our bird, use your heads. They're what you were hired for."

Worth looked solemn, but Falkner caught the pinch at the corners of Chaz's mouth that constrained a smile. She couldn't lecture him in front of the new hire. And she couldn't ask the new hire to look out for him, either. *He'll take it seriously when it counts*, Falkner told herself. And, *You can't sit on them like a hen on eggs.*

*

At least they didn't look like FBI. Worth hadn't thought of it as an advantage. She supposed she might look authoritative enough to be from the Health Department. Chaz looked like a med student interviewing for a summer job.

Worth walked through ER admitting briskly, and hoped Chaz, behind her, was doing the same. "We have a plan?" he murmured over her shoulder.

"Everyone else is interviewing supervisory staff, because they may have noticed things. We're going to talk to the rank and file."

"Because nobody gossips to the boss." He sounded pleased. "We need a cover story if we're not going to spook the gamma."

They were out of sight of the front desk, so Worth stopped and hugged the wall to let an orderly with a cart pass. "Human Resources?"

"Independent health management consulting service hired by Human Resources to study workplace environment and compliance with non-discrimination policies." He said it on a single exhale, without pausing to consider.

Worth nodded. "You're a genius."

He shrugged and grinned. "I'm good at plausible deniability."

Worth resolved to ask later what he'd practiced on.

"You interview, I'll watch," he added.

"Watch for what?"

"For 'which of these things is not like the others.' It's sort of my superpower. Lame, but true."

"Right now, it beats flying."

They collared nursing assistants one by one, whenever they seemed to be between duties. Worth assured them of confidentiality, and asked about the job, about their coworkers: was anyone hard to get along with? Critical? Intolerant?

Chaz pretended to take notes on Worth's Palm. Because she knew he was doing it, she could feel his attention shift, settle, shift again.

It was slow going, through the crowded emergency department. Because of interviewing Benson, Worth noticed smells: the black-haired nurse who wore too much perfume, the volunteer with blonde streaks and hairspray. The hospital itself smelled like floor wax, antibacterial soap, the old-yeast smell of the dispensary. She couldn't explain the occasional whiff of nail polish remover.

Whenever she glanced up she expected to see someone she knew. Wrong city, wrong time. But two paramedics in dark navy hurried by with a gurney, and she looked, even though she knew better.

"Ghosts," she muttered to Chaz, and laughed, and realized he had no idea what she meant. He nodded, but his attention was fixed on the hallways, sharp as a hunting animal.

The entire staff below the level of LPN seemed to have complaints about their supervisors or each other. Worth listened, waiting. Someone would say it, or would complain about a staff member saying it: no one here is competent. No one is intelligent. Only me. I know what's right.

They turned the corner into an older wing of the hospital. Narrow corridors, more traffic--nurses, doctors, patients, visitors, a maintenance guy replacing a ceiling fluorescent fixture. Worth flagged down a skinny Asian nurse's assistant with blue eyeliner and a blue flowered scrub tunic. "Excuse me," she said, trying hard for Falkner's "trust me" voice. "Do you have time to answer a few questions?"

The Asian woman's ID read, "Janet Miyaki." "Lady, I got time for a cup of coffee. And my mom said don't talk with your mouth full." She started to push past Worth and Chaz.

Another woman, a nurse if Worth read the accessories right, hurried toward them. "Janet, they need you to monitor the Bianchi boy." She looked past Miyaki to Worth and Chaz, and seemed to register their civilian status for the first time. "Sorry."

Cigarette smoke. One of these women was a smoker.

"Break," Miyaki said. "Union rules. No can do." She nodded toward an exit sign, fumbling in her tunic pocket. The nurse muttered something that sounded politically incorrect and hurried off down the hall.

Miyaki frowned. Then her mouth opened, wide, wider, a soundless scream with no air. Her hands flailed at her throat and mouth.

"Chaz, she's *here*. Airway!" Worth yelled. She yanked Miyaki close, swatted her hands away from her face. In the woman's straining mouth, she could see the tongue pulled back, flexed, saliva pooling in the space behind her bottom front teeth.

Worth stuck her knuckles between Miyaki's back molars, just in case, and grabbed at her tongue with thumb and forefinger. It was slick and strong and she couldn't grip it. Mikaki's front teeth scraped her fingers.

They'd used a square of gauze for this, to get friction. No gauze. No supply cart. No god-damned *help*--

"Shit. Sorry," she said to Miyaki, yanked the sleeve of her jacket down, folded the hem over her fingertips, pinched down on the woman's tongue, and pulled.

The cloth gave her more purchase. A screech of air dragged into Miyaki's throat before Worth lost her grip. "Gauze and a fucking airway over here, now!" Worth screamed.

"Got her," said Chaz, in a voice so low and fierce she almost didn't recognize it.

For an instant Worth couldn't remember what that meant. He stood stiff as a pointing dog, as a cat watching motion in the grass, and his gaze fixed on a woman with short brown hair in a bright print scrub top who stood at the end of the crowded hall. The print was of kids sailing hot-air balloons. The skin of her face was slack over the bones. She watched Miyaki with a fixed and unalarmed stillness.

Two people in white armed with gloves and gauze and an NPA finally, *finally* shouldered Worth aside and pounced on Miyaki.

The brown-haired woman--the *gamma*--raised her eyes from Miyaki and saw Chaz. She turned and bolted back down the hall. Chaz plunged after her.

"Shit. Chaz!"

The gamma body-checked a swinging door and banged through. Chaz dodged the maintenance man's ladder and an inattentive resident with a clipboard and disappeared after her.

Worth jabbed numbers on her phone. *Turn off cellphones and pagers in hospital.* She apologized mentally to any patients whose life support she was reprogramming.

"Lau," said the voice in her ear.

"We've got her. Five foot nine-ish, short brown hair, bright print scrub top, face looks like she's lost weight recently. East wing, other side of the Emergency Department--going through a door labeled A-17. Hall stripes are

blue and green. Chaz is pursuing. Send backup." She slapped her phone closed and slammed through the doors.

Chaz, unmistakably, disappearing around a corner ahead, his gun out and low. She could smell, under the antiseptic, a clean dampness, salt, and a little nail polish remover.

It was the physical therapy wing. Worth drew her own weapon as she bolted past a treadmill, a passive-motion machine, and a rack of rainbow-colored hand weights.

She rounded the corner and saw Chaz, and the door ahead of him closing slowly on its hydraulic hinge. He hit it with his shoulder to smack it open.

A swift arc of motion beyond the door, of something primary-blue. It ended at Chaz's head with a shocking thump, and he fell and rolled and disappeared with a splash.

Worth hurtled through the doors, prepared to dodge.

The smell was salt water. In the middle of a green-tiled room, the water in a therapy pool rocked and smashed over the sides from the force of Chaz going under. The hard-surfaced walls echoed back the sound of the blow, the splash, the noise of the blue ten-pound hand weight hitting the wet cement floor.

Chaz's head broke the surface of the pool, and the brown-haired woman knelt and shoved it back under.

"FBI!" Worth yelled, sighting down her Glock. "Let him go!"

And felt her tongue close the back of her throat.

Panic. She'd learned not to panic. She hadn't learned not to *breathe*. On her knees on the cold cement, her brain screaming *We're going to die!*

Instinct said drop her gun. Use her hands to tear her throat clear. She fought to raise the Glock. Her arms were weak, shaking. She scrambled her jacket sleeve over the skittering fingers of one hand and tried to grip her tongue. The jacket fabric pulled away as her arm bent, goddamn it, use *both hands*. She shoved the gun behind her across the floor. But her vision speckled with black--

A rush of water, over the roaring in her ears. She could breathe again. Chaz was out of the pool and struggling with the gamma, who was too strong for a woman that size.

Chaz's gun was in the pool. Hers was somewhere behind her. Chaz was in her line of fire.

She scrambled for her gun anyway. And her throat closed again.

The gamma had pinned Chaz from behind, above the elbows. Blood ran down over the right side of his face from somewhere in his hair, from that first blow. He snapped his head backward, but he was too tall to head-butt the woman. She would strangle Worth, then Chaz.

His elbows were pinned almost behind his back. But he stretched his left forearm hard, fingers reaching, clawing, to draw something from a second holster on his belt.

She realized what it was a moment before he used it. No part of the gamma was within his reach. So he fired the taser charge into his own wet body.

The crack was like a giant bone breaking. The smell was ozone and scorching cloth and skin. The two figures joined in a horrible spasmed curve and flash; then they separated and fell, Chaz to one side, the gamma almost in the pool.

She could breathe.

She didn't bother to stand up; she scrambled across the floor to Chaz. She rolled him on his back, tipped his head to clear his airway, and crossed her hands over his chest.

The gamma raised her head, groggy, glaring. Worth felt her tongue crawl back in her mouth.

Worth launched herself at the gamma, hit her high in the chest and knocked her backward onto the lip of the pool. She slammed the heel of her hand under the gamma's chin, held her head back and down into the water, and put all her weight on it.

All her weight against the muscles in the woman's neck. She saw them cord. They shouldn't be strong enough to push her back. It wasn't right.

Through the threshing water the woman's brown hair waved like fishes' fins. Her eyes glared up at Worth, desperate and fixed.

A gamma was hard to kill. Like the hopped-up robber the police had gunned down, that Worth and Vin and Josh had loaded into the ambulance, no heartbeat, no breath sounds. Who'd sat up and killed them anyway.

She could have saved them. She could have been faster. If she'd known. But by the time she put the defib paddles to the monster's temples, it was too late.

How long, to drown a gamma?

Chaz lay still on the cold floor, his chest motionless. He was cyanotic. He was dying. How long since the taser? How long before the thing under her gave up and drowned?

The woman's eyes pinched tight. Her chest heaved and heaved, and her neck went limp.

Worth gave a last desperate shove to push her further under and scrambled across the wet tiles to Chaz.

Compressions--one hundred per minute. The timing was as natural as her own breathing. Just move the blood around. They were in a hospital, for God's sake, they could save him.

Her tongue closed her throat again.

She didn't look up. Elbows locked, she could keep up the rhythm for a long time before she suffocated, it was just a matter of rocking forward...

"FBI," said someone very far away. It was followed by the shattering noise of a gun firing in a closed, hard room, over and over.

She could breathe. She hadn't lost count. Brady crouched across Chaz's body. His lips moved, but she couldn't hear him; was she going unconscious? No, the gunshots.

"He needs defib," she said, knowing she was shouting. Brady bolted. She kept rocking in rhythm.

Eventually the hospital team took over. They had to drag her off him, because she didn't notice when they came in. She slumped on the concrete

while they took care of Chaz. She wasn't certain about the details of that part, but that was all right; she'd seen it done before, when she was clear-headed.

Then they were gone, and she was still sitting on the wet floor. Brady was cross-legged in front of her. "What happened?" he said, and she realized she could hear again.

"He had to taser himself to get to the gamma." She sounded as affectless as Dr. Frost.

"Where were you?"

"Being strangled." Did he blame her for this?

"Which one of those is your gun?" Brady nodded at the pool, and at the end of the room where the Glock had skidded against the wall.

"The one on the floor."

"It should have been in your hand." His voice was tight and thin. "And you should have pulled the trigger until it went click, click, click."

Well, at least she wasn't numb anymore. "Easy for you to say."

Brady leaned forward, and everything about his perfect face was hard. "Easy for me to *do*. It had better get easy for you, too. You'll hear a lot of shit from Reyes about how we don't learn from dead gammas. But they're monsters. If there's anything left of the person they were, you can assume it would rather be dead." His voice cracked, and he drew air in through his teeth. "Once one of 'em comes at you, you fire your weapon until the magazine is empty, and if you have to, slap another one in. Anything else is suicide. Or, worse case, murder."

Worth folded her arms over her stomach. She was starting to shake. "Is he going to be okay?"

"I don't know." He seemed to reconsider that. "They had his heart started by the time they got to the hall, so that's a good sign. He's tough." He stood up and held out a hand.

There were cops and CSI beside the pool. She hadn't noticed them past his body, and the intensity of his presence. The water in the pool was tinted red.

She let him pull her to her feet. There was no hiding the shaking, really. It was normal, but she was ashamed of it anyway.

He took off his jacket, wrapped it around her, and left his arm around her shoulders. "Come on. Let's go hear the prognosis."

*

Cora Marie Pace, 40, had watched her husband die of lung cancer. Six months later, her eleven-year-old daughter was diagnosed with emphysema. No one had diagnosed Pace's contact with the anomaly. Falkner wondered if it had whispered to her, a voice on her shoulder, or if it had seemed only a series of natural conclusions, one growing out of another. Until she was moved to murder, and had the power to do it.

Brian Bianchi, whose new stepmother Pace had killed, was winning his battle with pneumonia.

The medical examiner who'd first asked for the team got Frost's autopsy, and as much of the facts as was reasonable.

"Enlightenment, one file cabinet at a time," Reyes grumbled as he dropped into his seat on the plane.

"That's one more than you had last week." Falkner shoved her carryon under her seat with her foot and turned to study the rest of the team. "Once we're in the air, take the couch," she ordered Chaz.

"I'm *fine*," Chaz growled. The Steri-strip at his hairline contrasted nicely with his grayish-pale face.

"Did I end that with a question mark?"

He bit his lip. He wouldn't fall over, anyway; the rest of the kids had him stuffed up against the window again, with Brady on the aisle. This time Worth was sitting across from him, where she could watch for signs of distress. Falkner wondered if Chaz knew that.

And having to watch Chaz--or feeling she had to--gave Worth something to center on. There was some internal wobble in Worth, Falkner was certain. Well, if she needed to, she'd step in.

Lau had made sure there was food in the galley's mini-fridge and cupboards, and had restocked the coffee. Falkner checked them again, because she had

to do something, and nothing needed doing. In about twenty-four hours her body would realize the job was done, the emergency was over, and she could let go. But her internal spring was slow to unwind.

Besides, from this vantage point she could examine Brady. She assumed he knew she was doing it. Brady would understand that, no matter how justified the shoot, his bosses would watch for how he took it. The requisite administrative leave was purely paperwork. It had nothing to do with psychology.

Behind her, Worth said, outraged, "Your eyes are *two different colors*!"

"It's called heterochromia." Chaz was still grumbling.

"Do you realize I've been sitting here worrying that you're concussed, and all the time it's just that you're *weird*?"

Falkner held her breath; that wasn't the sort of thing just anyone could say to Chaz.

But he snorted. "Ow. Don't make me laugh. Ow."

"You just noticed that?" That was Lau.

Worth protested, "The light has to be right."

"And you have to be staring at me," said Chaz. "Which you're too shy to do."

"Am not!"

"Ow again."

"That's blackmail," Lau observed. She made it sound like a feature.

"He's got sheepdog eyes," said Brady blandly. "Like a blue heeler. Man, they're great dogs. I had one when I was a kid."

"Brady," Chaz said, "are you saying I'm a dog?"

"I'm saying you're a *great* dog. Loyal, smart, hard-working, eat you out of house and home--"

"Ow ow ow ow."

"Suck it up, kid."

The seat belt light came on. Falkner straightened and turned back toward her place. As she did, Brady looked up and caught her eye. She gave him half a smile, on the side where the others couldn't see, and went to buckle in.

By the time they reached altitude, Chaz was too tired to fight against the couch. Brady took one of the solo seats up front, and Lau the other; they reclined them and went to sleep on either side of the aisle, Lau curled like a kitten, Brady with his jacket pulled over his head.

Nobody ever slept on the way out. They'd learned to sleep on the way back, though. You slept when you got the chance; it was like the Army in that respect, at least.

Worth was awake, looking out the window at nothing.

Falkner stood up--the stretching was only partly pretext--and went back to sit across from her. She kept her voice down when she asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah." Worth scrubbed at her face with both hands and murmured, "But I could have not been."

"Any landing you walk away from."

"No, I don't mean me. I-- If I were going home and he weren't..." She looked across the aisle to the couch and Falkner followed her gaze. Chaz had pulled the blanket to his chin in his sleep, and his feet showed at the other end, vulnerable and foolish in brown wool socks.

"That could happen. It doesn't happen often, thank God. The Bureau is not in the habit of losing expensive field agents. But it's not impossible."

"It came pretty close this time."

"He's tougher than he looks." Falkner didn't say, *It's one of the anomaly's gifts.*

Worth looked down, and her bangs slid to hide her eyes. She was worrying the adhesive bandage on her scraped fingers.

"Worth."

Worth looked up.

"'Competent' is not an insult," Falkner said.

Worth looked blank for an instant; then she flushed. "No, ma'am."

Falkner stood up. "Get some sleep. Or you'll be amazed how rotten you feel by the time you get home."

*

Everything looked different: the hall, the bullpen, the color of the walls. The monitors in the computer room changed all the time, but the context of the room seemed altered. Worth knew it wasn't true. *She* was different. If this had happened when she worked Down the Hall, she didn't remember it.

It was early, and quiet. Brady would be out until the inquiry was over, and Chaz was taking a sick day. Reyes' office was dark. Todd and Lau were nowhere in sight. There was light beyond Falkner's door.

"Boo," said a voice behind her.

It was Gates. "Sorry," said Worth, and got out of the doorway.

"What for?"

"Being in your way?"

This morning Gates's hair was doing something complex and knotted on the back of her head, and her glasses were cat's-eye shaped and blue. "Peaches, if you're in my way, I'll probably say something like, oh, 'Ex*cuse* me, you're in my way.' Now, come into my lair and let me give you chocolate."

"It-- Why?"

"Ordinarily, I would tell you to never look gift chocolate in the motivation. But in fact, I have a reason." Gates sat down at her desk, pivoted the chair to face Worth, and said, "Chaz is my totally-unrelated-by-blood little brother. You saved his life. I owe you chocolate."

"I didn't really--"

Gates spun, tapped a monitor, and spun back. "I have the initial case reports *and* the hospital records. Sweetie, you're trying to bullshit the Oracle at Delphi." She leaned sideways, stretched out an arm, and snagged a box with the Jacques Torres logo on the lid. "Bring this back when it's empty."

Worth wanted to stick her hands in her pockets. "That's not why I did it."

"I know. That's just one more reason why I love you and want you to have chocolate." Gates sighed. "The blood is draining from my arm."

Worth took the box, opened it, and held it out. "You start."

Gates grinned. "I knew you were a right 'un." She plucked a truffle. "Also, in case it comes up, call me Hafidha. Even His Eminence only calls me 'Agent Gates' when he's extra-peevish."

"If I say, 'Call me Daphne,' do I get more Scooby jokes?"

"Probably. But only with respect and affection."

"That's okay, then. Um, wander by at regular intervals and help me eat these, okay?" Worth started for the bullpen.

"Daphne? Did I actually say 'thank you?' Thank you."

Worth looked back over her shoulder. "Any time," she replied, and meant it.

Learn to Swim

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., December, 2005

"Can you swim?" Brady asked.

"Of course I can swim." Chaz considered leaving it at that, and decided against it. "I grew up in Las Vegas, one of the private pool capitals of the world. Not teaching Vegas kids to swim is equivalent to drowning them."

"Who taught you?"

Chaz shrugged. "YMCA." It was the Cepaks who'd thought kids should learn to swim. All their fosters got swimming lessons. He'd been miserable until he understood the mechanics and made them work. But he'd been determined to make them work, because drowning was a dumb way to die. And whoever heard of a hero who couldn't swim?

That was back in the days when he planned to learn to ride a horse, because you never knew when you might need to steal a horse and ride across the desert at night to escape your enemies. Before he got a chance at that, he'd realized that learning to drive would be better insurance than learning to ride a horse. So he learned to drive as soon as he could reach the pedals.

And that was the end of *that* foster home.

He wondered if he'd have been better off or worse if Nevada had had a state orphanage system. More stable, in some ways. But it would have been a lot harder to get hold of the car keys.

WTF BBQ

Woodbridge, VA, Memorial Day, 2007

Part 1

Daphne Worth hadn't meant to be the first one at the cookout, either. But she'd said she'd pick up the drinks, and she'd been scared to death of getting lost, being late, or just plain being abducted by aliens between the condo door and Brady's white, picture-window, ranch-style house in the south suburbs. So when she pulled up it was obvious she was early; the curb beside the neatly-edged strip of lawn was barren of other vehicles and the front door of the house was tight shut.

Daphne turned the engine off but left the keys in the ignition. For a moment she sat with her hands on the wheel, considering pulling back out and driving around the block a couple of times. But as her hand was dropping to the key, Brady's door swung open and he filled up the aperture. *Busted by a man who keeps a nice lawn,* she thought. *He was a quiet type. Kept to himself.*

He strode down the brick walk, sunlight catching highlights off his thick sandy hair, and let the screen door bang. "Worth! Need a hand with anything?"

"Got a wheelbarrow?" She pasted the smile to her face--it got easier with practice--and popped the trunk. Two cases of beer, two bags of soda, a case of Deer Park spring water. Chips, onion dip, hamburger buns. "It's just drinks. I don't cook. From each according to his ability, right?"

"Beer is never wrong at a barbecue," he said.

"Chaz said to bring sliced Italian bread, too." She grabbed the bag off the passenger seat, swinging it across the center of the car as she stood up. "How much are we planning on eating?"

"Chaz and Hafidha are coming." He stacked the beer and water so he could pick up all three cases at once, and still had a hand free for the trunk when he was done. She followed him up the walk, her arms full of paper bags, and as he held the screen door for her he said, "It's pretty much impossible to bring too much food."

When she glanced at him to see if it was a joke, he winked. The bags crinkled as her arms tightened in surprise.

"Exhale," Brady said. "We're not that scary."

"New kid. First company party. You know."

"Yeah."

She heard him lock the screen door behind them, but he left the inside door standing wide. *Open for business*.

Whatever she'd expected from Special Agent Danny Brady's private castle, the living room confirmed it. Steel gray carpet, gas fire closed down for the summer, royal blue leather couch, loveseat, and recliner. Glass-topped coffee table, and a high-definition television big as an army cot. The house was open-plan, living room divided from the dining room by a glass brick wall, light shining in through foundation plantings outside the window on the east. She wondered if he had a maid service.

"I didn't picture you as a glass brick kind of guy," she said, as he slid the beverages onto the breakfast island and walked around it to pop the fridge. Daphne was no expert, but it was a serious-looking kitchen: stainless appliances, double sink under a broad window open on the back yard.

She heard a motor running in the street, the put-putter of an aged four-cylinder.

"Built in the seventies," he said dismissively. "That's Chaz. I recognize the car. You want to get the door for him while I put this beer where it will do the most good?"

"In your belly?" Daphne asked, her pulse jumping as if she had said something greatly daring. She set her bags on the table and dove for the door before Brady could answer.

When she reached it, she burst into startled laughter. Because there was Chaz Villette unfolding his Jacob's-ladder body from the driver's seat of a baby-blue ragtop 1977 Volkswagen Beetle with Bondo-spotted fenders, his leather backpack slung off his left shoulder.

He looked up when he heard her, and she did a doubletake. In less than seventy-two hours he'd been transformed: the sallow complexion she'd

apologetically thought of as bloodless replaced by a burnished and distinctly non-Caucasian bronze. If she found him unconscious in her ambulance now, she'd be reporting him as male, mid-twenties, and Latino, and worrying about making sure there was a Spanish-speaker handy when he woke up, just in case.

As she blinked at him, cheeks numb with a poleaxed expression, he pushed sunglasses up a browned Andalusian nose she now realized might have been inherited from some unknown Conquistador. But then he ducked his chin apologetically, awkwardly, and was suddenly just Chaz again. "Chick magnet?" he offered with a nod at the car, light voice scratching uncertainly.

She had recovered herself enough to laugh again. She stepped out the door as he walked around to the front of the Bug and grabbed the formerly chrome-plated latch. She said, "Worked for Ted Bundy."

"Mine's got both seats." He started stacking Styrofoam coolers on the curb. "Careful" --as she went to lift the first couple-- "that's hot."

"It's a *cooler*."

"Insulation is insulation." He shrugged, a gesture that always seemed to be about making defensive spikes out of his collarbones. "This one has ice and meat in it," he said. "And this one's ceviche. Are you sure...?"

"Got it," she said, lifting. The coolers weren't that heavy. Heavy enough, but not exactly a 175-pound rescue dummy. "Honest." She looked up as Lau's little red toppered pickup glided up at the curb. "Oh, look, here's Hafidha and Nikki. Hafs, could you--"

"In a heartbeat," Hafidha Gates said. She somehow managed to climb gracefully from the cab, despite platform sandals and a sweeping floral skirt and two Tupperware cake carriers stacked in her hands. She tossed beaded braids over her shoulder and shook them, as if the rattle pleased her. "Nikki, get the bag in the back?"

Nikki Lau was already bent over, rummaging behind the seats, shoving the razor-cut layers of her hair irritably behind one ear. "I brought wine coolers and guacamole," she said, as Daphne tried not to stare awestruck at the fit of her faded jeans. "This California girl knows better than to go *mano a mano* with real cooks. Is that yours, Daphs?"

"Um." She rested her chin on the topmost of the two coolers, foam denting under her fingers. "This is all Chaz. I don't cook--"

"Thank *God*," Lau said. Laden with bags and keys, she hip-checked the door and chirped the lock. "I thought I was the only one."

Her grin showed white, perfect teeth, and Daphne felt the tightness in her chest--of which she hadn't even been aware--ease.

Part 2

The beers Brady shoved into the freezer had cooled enough to drink, so he pulled out a Coors and two Sam Adams and cracked each in turn with the blue-handled church key.

Behind him, Chaz had dropped his backpack on one of the saddle-topped barstools and was rummaging through it. Brady set one of the Sams down on the island for Chaz and stretched across to hand the other to Worth.

"Thanks," she said, pushing her bangs out of her eyes with the back of her other hand. She drank from the bottle, eyes closing. "Wow, that's good."

Chaz laid a black nylon package on the island and unrolled it, revealing three black-handled knives--paring, chef's, and long-bladed filet.

"You know," Brady said, "I have knives."

Chaz grinned at him sideways from under tumbled hair. "You think so, do you?"

Brady rolled his eyes and reached for his beer, breaking eye contact. "Huh."

"Do you have a cutting board?"

Brady craned an arm to retrieve the tempered glass board from beside the fridge, and laid it down beside Chaz on the side opposite the beer.

Chaz nudged it with a pinky. "This'll trash your edge. Do you have a wood one? Or plastic?"

"Huh. Don't those hold bacteria?" Yeah, Danny Brady, stirring conversationalist. He crouched down to rummage under the counter. He was pretty sure he'd gotten a cheap wood cutting board when he moved in.

Chaz crouched down beside him, legs folding like a roosting crane's. Brady found the board under the sink and put it into his hands. "The science at this point tends to indicate that the wood has natural antibacterial properties," Chaz declared, and flushed. Probably because he'd noticed he sounded like an issue of *Scientific American*.

In the dining room, Daphne cleared her throat and said, "I'll go see how the girls are doing with that fire."

"Hand me the lamb shank first?" Chaz levered himself upright and pointed to the cooler.

Daphne set her beer down long enough to paw through the ice and pull out a lump of plastic-sealed meat that looked like it would make a pretty good murder weapon. She thumped it onto the counter.

"Excelsior!" Chaz said. "There's marinated chicken for the spiedies in there, too, and the soaked bamboo skewers. Why not take the whole thing outside and put the girls to work doing the obvious?"

"Slave driver," she said, but she picked the lightened cooler up and propped it on her hip. Beer reclaimed, she rolled her eyes, blew her bangs out of them, and beat a hasty retreat to the back deck.

"What's a spiedie?" Brady asked, intrigued enough to risk the lecture.

Chaz moved the lamb to the sink and nicked the plastic with his paring knife. "There's two pots of chili verde in that biggest cooler," he said, pointing with his elbow. "Could you stick them on the back of the stove to stay hot? The little one's for Falkner, so don't, you know--"

"Mix up the spoons," Brady said, walking around the counter. "Right. You made chili verde."

"Signature dish." Dry as gin. A thump as Chaz laid the lamb shank on the cutting board. "I am from Vegas."

"Which is not really the Southwest, man."

"Yeah, yeah, Dallas. Whatever." By the time Brady sorted the spoons and turned around, Chaz had butterflied the shank, and was running the tip of his knife underneath the bone, lifting it smoothly away from the meat.

Brady leaned over for a better look. Without looking up, Chaz said, "A spiedie is a kind of marinated meat grilled on skewers and served on folded-up slices of white Italian bread. It's a southern New York thing. Originally they made them with lamb, but now they use anything--chicken, pork, venison. It's meat and bread." He winked, without missing a stroke of the knife. "You'll like it."

"And the lamb is also spiedies?"

"The lamb is just kabobs. Spiedies have to marinate for days."

Whether it was the chef or the knife--or both--Brady had to admit, he couldn't have done what Chaz was doing. He rolled his Coors between his palms and said, "The UNSUB is proficient with a knife, and familiar with anatomy. He may be a butcher, a hunter, have medical experience--"

"Or just be really hungry all the time."

The knife danced, making impossibly tidy cubes. *Emeril, eat your heart out.* "Chaz, you're going to cut your hand off, man."

Chaz appeared not to have heard him. The knife would brush his fingertips on the next stroke, if it didn't sever them. "Seriously," Brady said.

But Chaz's fingers whisked aside at the last moment, the knife came down, and the final cubes of lamb lay glistening on the board. "Nah," he said, grinning like a stage magician after a particularly impossible trick. "I'm good at this."

He pointed to the olive oil and garlic on the counter, this time using his chin as the indicator. "Can you assemble a marinade, Special Agent?"

Brady drained his beer and dropped the bottle into the recycling bin under the counter. "I have that training."

"I defer to your experience, then, as senior agent. Don't forget the red pepper, though... is that grin meant to make me uneasy?"

"That depends," said Brady. He reached into the cabinet over the stove for a jar of crushed reds and opened a drawer for the whisk. "Have you ever worked bomb squad?"

Part 3

Lau was a Valley Girl, dammit. She could figure out how to use a simple gas grill.

And that was half the problem. She could figure out how to use a simple gas grill, and that was not what this was. This looked like the navigation panel on the Starship Enterprise, and not the Sulu-era one with the slider and a couple of nonfunctional push buttons in primary colors, either.

"We Laus believe in proper mesquite barbecue. Otherwise, cook it inside in the air conditioning like civilized folk."

Hafidha grinned. "Good try, Miss Direction. But you're not getting out of this one." She leaned over Lau's shoulder, frowning, and pointed to a dial. "It looks like you should turn that to light, and then push the red button?"

"You're not sure? You're supposed to be the technologist."

"That" --Hafidha aimed a long nail manicured in a starburst design at the gleaming red-enamel and chromed-steel temple of barbecue dominating the corner of Brady's deck-- "is no ordinary machine. Although it might in fact have a microchip in it. In which case, you should treat my guess as gospel truth."

"Hmm. Daphs still right inside?"

Hafidha craned her neck toward the house, skeleton earrings dancing on her shoulders. "Looks it. Why?"

"Because if it blows up, we might need medical care. Right." Lau extended a finger to the button. "Here goes nothing."

It made a satisfying scraping sound. And even a bright blue spark. But there was no ignition, and no flame. "Right," Hafidha said brightly. "No microchip!"

Lau stepped back and glared at the grill.

"You could ask Brady," Hafidha offered. When Lau rolled her eyes, Hafidha added, "But you'd never hear the end of it."

"You have *no* idea." Visions of getting boxes of matches for Christmas for the next ten years danced through Lau's head.

The sliding glass door scraped open, and Worth emerged, burdened with paper plates, bamboo skewers, and a gallon plastic bag full of what appeared to be raw chicken swimming in Italian dressing. "Fire and rescue," she announced, cheerfully. "Chaz wants us to turn these into chicken shish kebab with a funny name."

"Spiedies?" Hafidha bounced on her toes. "He made spiedies? Awesome!"

"All yours," Lau said. "I don't eat dead animal, and I'm not touching dead animal. But I am going to figure out this dratted NASA control module--"

Worth stretched to peer over the stack of paper plates. "Turn on the propane?"

"Huh?"

Worth set the food and paraphernalia on the picnic table, and came around to crouch beside Lau's knee. She tapped the rosette handle of the off-white tank under the gas grill. "Propane. Turn it on?"

"Oh," Lau said. She shook her head in disgust. "Spark *plus* flammable material. There goes my serial arsonist career."

Worth edged the shutoff open. The hiss of escaping gas reached Lau's ear, and as Worth stood she set the grill to "Light" again and pressed the button once.

Blue flame ran across the bottom of the grill like pooling water, and Lau and Hafidha cheered. Lau grinned, dusted her palms on her jeans, and stepped back from the grill. "There. You guys skewer the poultry. I'm going to go get a beer and see what Chaz brought for the noncarnivores."

"Bring chips!" Hafidha said. "Problem-solving makes me hungry."

Lau slid open the door and paused. Outside, Hafidha was showing Worth how to skewer chicken so it stayed put. Inside, Chaz and Brady were discussing food preparation in terms of past cases while pretending they weren't trying to gross each other out.

Teamwork. It's not just for the office anymore. "Villette, if you ate all that guacamole, you are a dead man."

Part 4

Esther Falkner spent twenty minutes wondering what to do with her hair.

At work, she wore it up, severe and businesslike. At home, she left it loose and long. It was another way to remind herself, *Leave the job at the job. Leave home at home.*

But compartmentalizing was a temporary coping strategy at best. It failed to account for a backyard potluck barbeque with her co-workers.

Her contributions to the food also required some internal negotiation. The tabbouleh was one of her party standards. But her other reflexive potluck contribution, salade niçoise, wouldn't fly.

"Leave the tuna out," Ben suggested. He sat at the desk in the kitchen, wearing the faded navy terrycloth robe he wouldn't let her replace, cuddling his first cup of coffee and craning a little backward to read craigslist. His glasses were on the bedside table. He always said he didn't need them for the computer.

Falkner sighed. "Anchovy paste in the dressing. It's not salade niçoise without it."

He got up to refill his cup. "Lau won't know there's anchovy paste in it if you don't tell her."

"*I'll* know."

He curled his arm around her waist and kissed her cheekbone, right in front of her ear; his breath brushed the lobe. "You're a better man than I am."

"Hah. Don't give me ideas, you. I'm on deadline here."

"Your *family* likes salade niçoise," Ben said plaintively.
"Then I'll make it for my family. Later." She kissed him firmly on the mouth and felt the prickle of his three-day-weekend beard.

Instead she improvised a main-dish salad--black beans, corn, tomatoes, rice, sweet onion, romaine, and avocado in chili-lime vinaigrette. She had, thank God, two *very* large covered bowls.

Hafidha and Chaz would be there, after all.

She went upstairs, took the HK sub-compact out of her gun safe, slid it in the pancake holster and tucked that into the small of her back, and made sure her shirt tail covered it. When she leaned forward the shape would show under the oxford cloth, but at this party that wasn't a concern.

Nothing left but the hair question. In a fit of desperation, she pulled it back, braided it, and let it hang.

Out in the hall, Rebekah's bedroom door was open. Rebekah sat cross-legged against her pillows in shorts-and-tank-top pajamas. She'd had soft, dimpled baby knees and elbows once, and a face so round you could hardly tell she had bone underneath. Now she sported an absurdly stern nose and a lot of forehead, and Falkner thought when she shed the last of her puppy fat her chin would be pointed. She had too much arm and leg for the rest of her, and just this year she'd decided to hate her curly brown hair.

She was showing Deborah how to fold a paper airplane. Deborah lay on her stomach at the foot of the bed, her chin in her hands. Falkner always insisted the girls wear sunscreen ("Skin cancer is a stupid way to die"), but Deborah was already penny-colored, and it was only the end of May. Deborah insisted on wearing her smooth black hair short, because of tree-climbing and gymnastics and karate and the sort of thing nine-year-olds seemed to think ought to be done on a bicycle nowadays.

They both looked up as Falkner passed on the way to the stairs. "Hi, Mom," Rebekah called. "Barbeque?"

"Yep. Be nice to your father, all right? He has no one to call for backup."

"Say 'hi' to Chaz."

"Yeah!" Deborah looked up from the airplane and smiled.

Posters of boys Rebekah insisted on referring to as "hot" studded her bedroom walls. None of them had the faintest resemblance to Chaz Villette. Falkner decided she had not just detected a crush in action. "Will do."

Woodbridge was on the other side of the D.C. sprawl from Silver Spring. She had plenty of time in the car to wonder if she should have invented a prior engagement. Nothing had as great a chilling effect on a party as the arrival of one's immediate superior. Brady may have thought, back in the office, that the invitation was a good idea. Things might look different at his

front door. Or he might have thought she was about as likely to show up as Reyes was.

Well, enter cheerful, declare she couldn't stay long, make a tidy social circuit and a timely exit. Not that tough.

Brady's house was a ferociously suburban single-story with a healthy, buzz-cut lawn and mounding junipers around the foundation. It was as considered and tended as his desk at work.

She juggled the bowls against her hip and rang the bell.

"Come in!" Chaz yelled, which was followed by Brady saying, "Hey, it's *my* house." She realized only the screen door was closed, and was about to try for the latch when Brady opened it.

"Hey, chief." He scooped the top bowl deftly out of her arms before she could speak and held the door open with a foot. "Glad you could make it." He nodded her across the living room toward a breakfast bar and the kitchen. "Chaz customized the chili verde for you."

Chaz stuck his head around the corner and waved a knife that might have given an UNSUB heart failure. "Yours has chicken." His wide mouth split his face in a grin. "Extra-spicy."

She set her bowl down on the counter beside one full of tortilla chips. Chaz was using the knife to push cubed meat off a cutting board onto a platter. Lau crouched at the refrigerator, searching the door shelves for condiments.

She smiled over her shoulder at Falkner. "Hi, boss. Beer?"

"Please." Her "I can't stay long" speech was scattered in her head; she scrambled to reassemble it.

Brady set the other bowl down and popped the lid. "Tabbouleh!" Chaz crowed. "Perfect with lamb." He pointed the knife at the platter. "You want to skewer these with alternating vegetable matter? Nikki refuses to enable."

"I can cover for her." Falkner took the lid off the salad. "Nothing you do can stop them, you know," she told Lau.

"They have to *want* to change." Lau handed her an opened beer and peered in the bowl. "Ooh, pretty. Ooh! *Lime!*"

Worth bounded in the sliding door from the back deck. "The rock things are hot. I think it's time to burn some food. Oh, hi, boss!"

"The 'rock things?'" Brady repeated. He snagged half the pile of skewers from in front of Falkner and started threading lamb and blanched vegetables on them.

Worth blushed. "Bottom of the grill. Distribute heat. What do *you* call 'em?"

Brady considered for a moment. "Rocks."

"See, I was close. Chaz, do we need instructions on how to eat the chicken that isn't kabobs?"

Lau shook her head. "The nouns are the first to go." Worth took a pretend swat at her.

Chaz slid past Worth and Lau to the stove like an envelope through a mail chute. He lifted the lid on a pot. "Fold a piece of Italian bread around it, pinch it off the skewer, bite, chew. Repeat."

"Good plan," Hafidha called from the sliding door. "Can we start doing it now? With chili? Hey, Es, you made it! Ooh, salad-thingie!"

"Tortillas should be warm by now," Chaz replied. "You know the drill: eat it before I do."

The moment had come and gone when Falkner could have made her casual speech. That was all right; she didn't need it now, anyway. She nudged Brady with her elbow. "Pass me the cherry tomatoes."

Part 5

Chaz craned his neck to peer over Brady's shoulder at the kebabs. "Don't leave them too long," he said, because he knew it would be annoying.

Lau grinned at Chaz across the barbeque, and the heat in his face had nothing to do with the gas fire. "You have no sense of self-preservation."

But Brady's voice and glare were relatively mild. "You aren't the only person on earth who can make his own damned food."

Chaz took another bite of Falkner's salad and pointed at the paper plate with his fork. "Obviously."

Worth, perched at the end of one of Brady's lounge chairs on the lawn, looked up through the bangs that half-hid her eyes. "Good thing, too. Some of us would starve otherwise." She followed that with a twitchy, apologetic smile, and shifted her gaze to the sapling tree at the corner of the deck. *Sorry about the interruption,* the gesture said. *Don't mean to force my way in.*

Of course, she was already in; she was the only person who didn't know it. Chaz wished he could think of a way to tell her so. Other than just telling her, which she wouldn't believe.

Because she'd looked away, he could stare at her without making them both nervous. He liked her gray eyes, round and wide when she was focused on a puzzle. He liked her strong, square jaw, her straight shoulders, and the muscle that worked in her forearms and wrists when she moved. Noticing gave him a pleasant little shiver. Purely aesthetic.

Sure, Chaz. Stop cruising your coworkers.

At least without encouragement.

Brady turned the skewers one after the other, a practiced, left-to-right sweep, and flipped the burgers beside them with the spatula in his other hand. Not bad for a guy who kept his knives loose in a drawer. Chaz breathed in the odors of searing lamb and beef. Flesh, blood, and char. Put that way, it ought to be disgusting. Instead it made his stomach growl. If he opened his mouth, he thought he'd drool like a St. Bernard.

A rising sound--a rumble like an unnaturally regular avalanche--reached the backyard from the street out front. *Stomach, meet motorcycle. You guys sound like kinfolk.*

"Duke's here!" called Hafidha. She and Falkner were out on the grass, deploying hoops and posts for croquet.

Brady raised his eyebrows at Chaz and waved the spatula at the house. "Get the door?"

"Guess I'll have to trust you with the cooking," Chaz sighed, and bolted before Brady could throw something other than food at him.

Chaz got to the front door as Sol Todd, helmet in one hand and cooler in the other, jogged up the step. The Harley leaned rakishly at the curb behind him.

"Brady said if you actually brought fermented duck eggs, I'm not allowed to let you in."

Todd shook his head. "Daniel Brady. A lion in the face of a psychotic killer. A mouse when confronted with duck ova."

"*Fermented* duck ova."

Todd held up the cooler. "Orchid noodles."

"Oh!" Chaz held the screen door open. "Enter freely, go safely, and leave something of the carbohydrates you bring."

"Not the most reassuring quote." Todd stepped over the threshhold.

"Don't worry. We've probably got enough food that no one's going to bite your neck. Probably."

He led Todd through the kitchen--"I like the glass brick," Todd said, so Chaz told him, "So does Brady, but he won't admit it"--and out onto the deck. Todd set the cooler down on the boards, lifted out a big square container and blue plastic tongs, and set them on the end of the folding table where the rest of the food was spread. When he took off the lid, Chaz breathed in a blended fragrance of sesame oil, soy sauce, and red pepper.

"Two-minute warning for carnivores," Brady called.

The sliding door screen scraped open. "Good timing," said Stephen Reyes, as he stepped out on the deck.

He wore a light green linen *guayabera* shirt, and pants that, however casual they were meant to be, still looked dressy on Reyes. And he carried a big stoneware crock with a towel wrapped around it like a muffler around a throat.

Reyes had come.

Chaz realized he'd begun to think of Reyes as being reconstituted every morning, then dried to a powder in the evenings and stored overnight, unless they were in the field. But here he was, magician's entrance and all.

And he'd brought food.

"*Frijoles negros*," Reyes said, and Chaz blushed, wondering just how much of his last twenty seconds' thought had scrolled across his face in lights. All of it, probably.

With a single swift movement Reyes slipped the towel off the crock, coiled it down on the table for a hot pad, and set the pot on it.

"You cook?" Chaz's voice cracked with surprise.

"To eat well, cook well." It sounded like a quote. Reyes tapped the lid. "My mother's recipe."

It occurred to Chaz to see if anyone else was as flat-footed as he was. Too late; if they were, they'd recovered. But he thought Brady, Lau, Hafidha, and Worth, at least, might have had something to recover from, given their studiously bland expressions.

Brady held out a skewer. "In that case, you can tell me if these are done. I don't trust Chaz."

"Hey!"

Chaz snagged the second sample. They were done. He pretended to be grudging about the approval.

"There is meat," Brady announced, and everyone but Lau (who got to the orchid noodles before Chaz) converged like kids on a puppy.

Well, only if they intended to eat the puppy. *Now is not the time to think of Mrs. Chow.*

There wasn't room at the picnic table for everyone at once. (*As at work, so at play,* Chaz observed, and wondered if he should say it out loud.) So they cycled, depending on who had gotten up for seconds. Eventually Chaz ended up cross-legged on the grass with an embarrassingly large wedge of Hafidha's German chocolate cake on a paper plate on his knee.

Worth dropped down beside him with a bowl full of vividly-ripe strawberries. "I love spring," she sighed.

"Strawberries and asparagus," Chaz agreed. "Not a bad consolation for winter."

She popped a berry in her mouth and bit it off its stem. She smelled like sunscreen and green apple shampoo and now, strawberries. Chaz realized he was staring. He dropped his eyes to his plate and hewed a chunk off the cake.

Worth studied the others as she chewed, so he did, too: Falkner, Reyes, Lau, and Hafidha at the picnic table, Brady and Todd refilling plates at the folding table on the deck.

Chaz waited for her to break the silence. When it didn't seem about to happen, he said, "Family cookout in the backyard."

She turned, cocked her head. "Complete with emotionally-distant father figure," she agreed, and grinned.

"Hey, I was expecting 'absent.'"

"Lau had to pick her eyeballs up off the deck."

"So it *wasn't* just me! Ex."

"Mom's straight face went a little crooked."

Chaz shook his head. "Didn't happen."

"Did! Perceptible motion!"

Chaz snorted.

"How's the cake?" Worth gazed at his plate wistfully.

"Here." He held up his plate and thrust his fork at her. When she looked like refusing, he said, "No, seriously."

She shrugged, took the fork, and shaved a little off, with frosting.

"Oh, come on."

"I don't want you to go hungry." Her deadpan was a beautiful thing. She took the bite. "Mm. On the other hand, that could be bad for you."

"Don't even think about it. Come on, we'll get you your own piece."

Reyes was scooping seconds of chili verde from the bottom of the pot when they hopped up the steps to the deck. Chaz felt absurdly pleased. *You feed your family.* And after tasting the Cuban black beans, Chaz thought he could consider Reyes's seconds a compliment.

Worth cut a stingy piece off Hafidha's cake while Chaz surveyed the remains on the table. Not bad: the sole evidence of the speidies was one heel of the Italian bread; the ceviche was reduced to a little juice and bits of garlic in the bottom of the bowl; and Reyes was claiming the last tortilla.

Chaz considered his own internal well-being. Not too shabby. He felt substantial and contented. His teammates around the picnic table looked about the way he felt.

"I know why *I'm* all about the food," he said to Reyes. "But what's everyone else's excuse?"

Reyes followed his gaze, narrow-eyed. Falkner, Brady, Lau, Todd, Hafidha, laughing and talking and eating. It made Chaz happy. And frightened. He had a lunatic urge to keep feeding them, to keep them at that table forever. As long as they were there, everything was all right. He felt Worth come up on his left, eating cake, and he wanted to freeze her there, too.

But Reyes turned to look at him, and time kept moving. "Isaiah 22:13," Reyes said. "'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die.'"

shadow unit

1.02 "Knock on Coffins" - by Elizabeth Bear

"Drive on, think positive, get off your butts, knock on coffins, etc."

-- David Berkowitz, 1977

Click here to play music.

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Act I

June 2007

Each Friday morning, Hafidha brought in two dozen doughnuts. One box contained two plain old-fashioned (Reyes); two sour cream glazed (Falkner); one chocolate dipped and one lemon-filled, no powder (Brady); one blueberry cake (Lau); one glazed and one chocolate-frosted (Worth); and two chocolate crullers (Todd). Because the bakery Hafidha favored considered any *proper* dozen to contain thirteen, she added two miscellaneous pastries, different every week.

The other box held six Boston custard creme, six assorted jelly, and a single chocolate-frosted with rainbow sprinkles. There was only one house rule regarding their consumption: no one could have the sprinkled one until all the rest were eaten. Hafidha and Chaz schemed mightily after that thirteenth doughnut, even when stragglers remained in the first box. Because the second dozen was the exclusive property of Shadow Unit's anomaloids, and God save any alpha--Special Agent or civilian employee--who wandered too near.

*

Daniel Brady watched rangy, brown-skinned, floppy-haired Chaz Villette spider across the bullpen from the kitchenette, four pastries balanced on a napkin and a cup of coffee in the other hand. Chaz nibbled at the Boston creme doughnut teetering atop his pile with crooked, functional teeth. Brady

ran his tongue across his own even bite, wondering if years of orthodonture had been worth it.

Brady leaned across the divider to Nikki Lau's desk and stage-whispered, "You know, a lot of serial killers are serious sugar junkies--"

"I heard that." Chaz slid into his desk across the aisle. If Brady were a strobe camera, Chaz would have been leaving trails of elbows and knees on the film. Chocolate smeared his upper lip; he sipped coffee and licked it off. "Is that true? I've never seen it in the literature."

"What, you might not have read a book in the English language?"

"It's Truman Capote," Solomon Todd said, from his desk behind Chaz's. He did not look up from a series of pie charts that appeared to hold him engrossed. "*In Cold Blood*. Our Danny boy is a reader."

Todd was fit, five-seven, bespectacled over dark-ringed gray irises, and somewhere in the indeterminate valley between forty-five and sixty. His dark hair was balding, his long unassuming face defined by horizontal lines: the slash of a concerned frown, the ladder of concentration up his brow. He mostly moved like somebody was puppeteering him. Hafidha called him Duke, after the comics character.

Brady was catching it.

"See? Capote. It *must* be true." Brady winked at Chaz, then turned back to Lau as she made one of her characteristic thinking fidgets. She wasn't his type, but he could manage an aesthetic appreciation of a pretty Chinese-American woman tucking glossy razor-cut hair behind a seashell ear.

She said, "Just be grateful you don't have to eat like that."

Enter Daphne Worth, stirring coffee, compact and professional in a tan summerweight pantsuit and a burgundy blouse that flattened her pale complexion, brown hair caught back in a short ponytail. "Grateful? I *wish* I could eat like that. But no, a second plate of spaghetti and you might as well roll me home."

"I'll eat it for you," Chaz offered, licking raspberry jelly off his mouth, one forefinger, and then his mouth again. There was powdered sugar on the lapel of a blue blazer that made him look like an awkward teenager dressed up as an FBI agent.

"Sure, but then I don't get to enjoy it, except as garlic sweat--" Whatever Worth had been about to say would hang forever unfinished on the air, because Esther Falkner--tall, athletic, brunette, olive-complected, reflexively hiding the old sore hitch in her step--swept past with a coffee cup in her right hand and a manila folder upraised in her left, her head tipped slightly toward it. Her loafers made no sound on the industrial gray carpet, and the gray wings of her tailored suit coat flared from her hips.

Chaz accordioned half a doughnut into his mouth and stood, dusting the powder from his coat. Brady held back and waited until Chaz, and Lau, and Worth, and Todd had grabbed cups and pens and notepads and Palm Pilots and Blackberries and fallen in behind Falkner like a row of somewhat flustered ducklings, and only then joined the end of the line.

Because tail-end Charlie was *his* job, that was why.

*

The briefing room was already hot and close, prickling sweat across Todd's bare scalp. He scrunched sideways in his seat to make more room for Brady's football-player shoulders, happy enough to have won the daily game of musical chairs. Hafidha Gates was last, having the furthest to walk. But Hafidha always got a seat, on behalf of her laptop--and the preservation of the credit rating of anybody who might try to shark her. And nobody but Reyes ever took Reyes' chair.

Falkner never sat during briefings, and today the other odd woman out was Lau, even though Brady had arrived after her, because Lau was standing outside and availing herself of the breathable oxygen which would soon be in short supply within the room.

As soon as Lau edged inside the door and shut it, Falkner started talking. "The good news is that to the best of our knowledge, nobody is dead."

"Great," said Brady, blocky hands folded. "Then the bad news would be the fate worse than death?"

Falkner's eyebrows were as good as a soliloquy, and Todd hid a responding smirk behind his coffee cup. From the short end of the table, where he could keep his back to the wall, Stephen Reyes replied to the covert gesture with a bushy-eyebrowed stare. His face was the color of an antique walnut table, and his expression about as forthcoming.

Todd saluted with the beverage. After a while, you just got used to Reyes noticing things. He almost never said anything to anyone about what he noticed, and certainly never to anyone whose business it wasn't.

Todd supposed that made him ethical.

There are no fates worse than death, Todd recited. One of the catchphrases they lived by, but he wasn't always convinced. Well, it was a strong theme, and worth exploring. Though maybe it should be an argument and not a statement. *Are there fates worse than death? What are fates worse than death? Can you phrase your answer in the form of a question?*

"Something like that," Falkner said, humorless. Chaz fiddled with his gadgety wristwatch and Brady abruptly got very interested in his Blackberry. "Someone in Omaha is driving college freshmen crazy."

"Crazy's not exactly a technical diagnosis." Chaz wiped his fingers on his trouser leg and picked up his mug. Milk fat on the surface reflected light.

"All right," Falkner said. "Symptoms of a psychotic break. There's an epidemic of schizophrenia at the University of Nebraska at Omaha."

"Schizophrenia isn't contagious," Worth pointed out.

"It is now. Five victims that we know of. All college-age, two men and three women, who would appear low-risk at the initial appraisal."

"Who's our liaison?" Lau asked. "How did we get an in on this one? Going crazy isn't a crime."

"The university president contacted the local field office directly, asking for help. His theory was that somebody might be spiking the victims, but there's no toxicology to support it. They kicked it up the ladder to the BAU. Pete Pauley says he got it last night, stared at it, shrugged, and decided to hand it to us. Everyone be sure to send a thank-you note."

Brady raised a finger. "Omaha PD?"

Falkner shook her head. "The police have had minimal involvement. We get to walk into this one at the top, which might be helpful."

Todd watched Reyes follow the reactions around the room.

Reyes cleared his throat and spoke. "The victimology is straightforward on the surface, Brady, but the first go-round with the profiles is yours. Find out what they have in common, who they know in common. Look for patterns of low self-esteem, emotional vulnerability, anger or aggressiveness. I don't know if you'll find anything about recent changes in demeanor in the files, but look at their grades. I'll lead the team on-site."

"Regarding the mental illness. If that's what it is. Symptomatology?" Worth asked.

Falkner, with a glance at Reyes for authorization, answered. "Typical of schizophrenia. Auditory hallucinations, conflation, disorganized thinking, flat affect. It's not clear if they're exhibiting consistency of hallucinations from one victim to the next."

Reyes said, "That's one of the things we need to assess when we get on the ground."

Todd said, "You're thinking of the case in Augusta." A year and a half before, a gamma in Maine had been infecting his neighbors with his nightmares. Two had been driven to suicide and a third had attempted it before the WTF stepped in. "Could it be a similar manifestation?"

Reyes shrugged. "They're all the right age for first signs of schizophrenia. Victimology will tell us if they all have troubled backgrounds. And then there's the timing."

"Five victims," Chaz said. "Assuming for the moment that they're all linked, and it would be very coincidental indeed if they weren't." He flipped papers. "One every six weeks to two months, if you need it or not. With time off for the holidays?"

"Or," Falkner said, "a sixth victim off-campus. No classes during winter break means no prey on the ground. He might have had to extend his hunting range. He wouldn't have wanted to break pattern. I'm sure he needs his fix."

"Crap," said Worth. "Hafidha, can you check police blotters?"

Reyes made a gathering gesture, right-handed. "Belay that until Omaha. We'll interview known associates when we get there. Todd, Lau, Gates, you're with me on this one. Hafidha, bring your gun."

He might have been ostensibly talking to Hafidha, but he was looking right at Todd. In response, Todd let the corner of his mouth twitch. There was Reyes, letting him know Reyes knew he had never liked carrying. But he was the best detail man on the team when it came to extracting secrets contained in mounds of paperwork. Professional slogger's skill from his journalist days. Like constructing narratives. Surprising how much carried over.

Reyes finished, "I have no idea what we're walking into, and I want everybody combat-ready."

"Hafs?" Worth, looking startled.

"Universities have computers," Reyes said, intentionally thick-headed. "So do university students."

Worth leaned over to Hafidha and murmured, "You're field-certified?"

Hafidha's blonde-black braids made a whispering sound over one another when she shook her head. Todd looked down at his hands while she answered. "I'm a sworn officer, honey. Six years in the Secret Service. Fraud and counterfeiting, mostly. I know which end to point at the bad man."

"She's a certified small-arms instructor," Falkner said, dryly. "Don't let her yank your chain, Worth. You head out in ninety minutes; Hafidha, show Worth what she needs to run com from here?"

"I can do that," Hafidha said. "But I can't give her my eyes. So I'll start going over blotters on the plane. Maybe a disturbance will come over Technicolor and we can find number six. If there is a number six."

"If there isn't," Falkner said, "there will be soon. It's nearly the end of the term. He'll want to get one more before summer."

*

"British royal family?"

Hafidha was pleased to discover that Daphne had mastered the gentle art of watching the screen without leaning over Hafidha's shoulder. Good for her. Reyes still hadn't figured it out. "I had detail on Princess Anne, once."

"Boring."

"Sweetie pie, it was the Secret Service, not the staff of *People* magazine." Daphne looked forlorn, so Hafidha gave her hand a pat. "Be a good girl and focus on the nice database search parameters, and I'll give you a truckload on the Pretzel Incident."

"Oooh!" Daphne poised the stylus over her Palm obediently.

Brady, leaning on the back counter and drinking coffee, looked up from the victim files. "If you compromise national security, I'm telling."

"You pay attention. You might need to know this someday, too."

"Do I look like a search string kind of guy? Or a Pretzel Incident kind of guy, for that matter?"

Hafidha slid her glasses down her nose and looked at him over the top of the frames. "What, you're too pretty to be smart?"

Daphne snickered.

"Okay, okay." Brady sounded grudging, but he grinned. "I'm paying attention."

As Hafidha was setting permissions on Daphne's login, Chaz wandered in, a crisp-creased sheet of paper in one hand. It fluttered with the soft sound of high-rag-content laid. Her overhead light shone through the translucent watermark: Crane's Bond. Spendy.

Chaz looked from Brady to Daphne, frowning for a moment before correcting his face into a smile. Hafidha guessed he'd hoped to catch her alone, but the paper in his hand was a confession of intent, and he wasn't about to back down where anybody could see him. "Hey. Not just Velma, it's Fred and Daphne, too!"

Daphne pointed a finger at him and tipped her head; she packed an effective glower. "That still makes you Shaggy."

"I would *still* rather be the dog." Chaz smiled disarmingly, then set the paper down on the console beside Hafidha's keyboard. Daphne backed away, giving him room. Chaz hated to be crowded; funny how anybody with any sense picked up on that right away.

He said, "Hafs, I want to know if this is a scam." His fingers moved nervously as he reached to smooth the letter, as if he had to find an excuse to

touch it.

It looked real. Letterhead for an attorney in Tyler, Texas, the language just what it ought to be from a law office to notify the beneficiary of a will. Namely, Chaz.

Hafidha leaned back in her chair, hands clasped in her lap. "And this is work-related how?"

Chaz craned his gazelle neck to look over his shoulder, scanning for Falkner or Reyes. He turned back and tapped the paper with fingers that had not left its surface when he turned. "Look, you can have the thirteenth doughnut, okay? Just please can you run the search before you go?"

She cracked her shoulders against the back of the chair, and grinned. "Smarty-boy, you know better than to ask that question."

"You're right. Bad choice of words. I meant 'would you.'"

"See?" She sat up and skittered fingers across keys. "It's all in how you ask. So, property description...aaand title on file...and there you go. Yep, you are the proud owner of forty acres of Tyler County, Texas. Says so right there." Hafidha poked the screen. "Ooh, real estate. I smell money."

Chaz snuck a handful of chocolate--the good stuff; Hafidha didn't hold with slave-labor candy--out of her stash, no doubt to make up for the sacrificial doughnut. He leaned over her shoulder without touching her. "Charles Travis Villette. Would you look at that."

Hafidha read up the screen. *Deeded to Adeline Mary Villette (deceased). Previous title holders, Francis William and Mary Perault Villette.*

And Chaz said, "Huh. I own a ranch. Small ranch. Real small ranch, for Texas."

Brady said, "Kid, that's *East* Texas. It's not a ranch. It's a farm."

Chaz chuckled. "Wonder if it comes with a mule."

Hafidha said, "Your grandparents?"

"Dunno," he said. "I guess." The candy pattered back into the bowl. Apparently he'd thought better of it. Hafidha didn't mind; Chaz's hands were always clean. "Adeline was my mom."

He might have said more, Hafidha thought. She could feel his confusion hanging in the air between them. But Brady, the Texas boy, cleared his throat. "You don't sound like Tyler County."

The expectant moment snapped. Chaz straightened up, stuffing his hands into his back pockets. "I've never been there. But my mom sounded like Tyler County. Well, she didn't sound like Vegas."

Daphne cleared her throat. "So what's Tyler County sound like?"

Chaz, shaking his head, picked up his letter even as Hafidha was pulling up Google Earth, Google Maps, TerraServer, and a few less public satellite imaging systems. He said, "Can't do it. Never could. So... the Tyler County seat would be in, um, Tyler?"

She knew a subject change when she heard one. "Oh, you'd think. But the Lord and the state of Texas work in mysterious ways, honey. Tyler's in Smith County. The biggest burg in Tyler County is..." Typing. "Woodville." She snickered. "Population 2,415."

"Good grief. How do you get there?" He'd grown up under the approach paths of the seventh--now sixth--busiest airport in the U.S, she recalled.

Warm plastic smoothed under her fingertips, the action of her vintage M-series keyboard clicking rewardingly with every keystroke. They didn't make 'em like this anymore.

"DFW to a regional airport two hours away. If you drive really fast. Oooh, I bet they have killah speed traps." She turned and caught his gaze, the left eye brighter than the right, with the green streaks in it. Funny to think it used to weird her out, and now it was just Chaz.

"Sweetie, I think you inherited the location where they shot *Deliverance*. Sshh..." She held up a hand. "Paddle faster, I hear banjos."

"Could you maybe not have quite so much fun with this?" But he was grinning.

"Want me to Google the directions for you?" Her fingers hovered the keyboard. "Want to see the house?"

"Ngh. No, thanks. It's been there since--" Hafidha recognized the hesitation. The date was on the title, which was now in Chaz's head. "--1952. It'll stay

there for a while."

She had already started typing. Her fingers stumbled on the keys. "Don't you want to get in touch with your roots?"

"God, no." He backed away. She'd lost him. And the profilers in the room were both looking up curiously as he sidled towards the door. "My mom grew up in a Steve Earle song. I get it. I get it."

He didn't make three steps before Danny went after him, calling, "Hey Chaz. If you're not busy, help me with the victimology!" leaving Daphne and Hafidha standing in an uncomfortable silence in Hafidha's office.

It was hard being the new kid. All these dynamics, all this implied knowledge, and no way in to it unless you picked it up from context, or asked.

Asking was one of the things Daphne seemed pretty good at. "Hafs, what just happened?"

"Ah." Hafidha snagged a handful of chocolate from the bowl and held it up for Daphne, who accepted. "At a guess? Chaz just inherited forty acres of nowhere from a relative he didn't even know he had, and he's a little freaked out about it."

"How can you not know you have grandparents? Everybody has grandparents."

"But not everybody knows their grandparents, honey. Chaz's mom died when he was a wee bitty child. So based on that letter he showed me, I'd also guess his grandparents didn't know their daughter was dead, or that they had a grandson. It'd rattle anybody."

"Shit," Daphne said. "I'm glad I didn't ask him--"

Hafidha shrugged. "Long time ago. Want another chocolate?"

"No, thanks." She popped the last one from her hand into her mouth. When she spoke, the smell of candy followed. "Hafs, can I ask you a question that's totally inappropriate for the workplace?"

"Honey, inappropriate is my internet identity. Unless you're going to ask for a date, in which case, flattered, but I like boys."

Daphne laughed, strained and nervous. Not uncomfortable with Hafidha flirting, but with whatever she was about to say. "No, I'm seeing someone. But while we're on Chaz. And his family. Does Chaz, er, what I mean is--"

"Does he have an ethnic identity?" It was the question everybody asked, sooner or later. Hafidha arched one eyebrow like Mister Spock. She could do the *Bewitched* nose-wriggle, too, if called upon.

From the way she winced against the red tide rising across her cheeks, Daphne was probably wishing *she* had an ethnic identity at that particular moment. But she held it together and asked, "I thought he was just white--maybe Mediterranean French, or something--and funny-looking. And then he came to the thing on Memorial Day weekend a different color. In just a couple of days. Most folks don't tan that fast. But Villette isn't any kind of Hispanic name I've ever heard of..."

Hafidha winked. "Well, Reyes is, and the nefarious Doctor Stephen's darker than me--"

"Afro-Cuban. Sure. I get that. I just wondered about Chaz."

"Ah, and you see, sweetie, you're going to keep wondering. Because from what he tells me, nobody knows for sure. When he first got here it was September, and I thought he was a brother. But now I suspect it's something complicated back there. Black, white, Latino, Indian, the other kind of Indian--who knows? Some kind of Creole. He's too pretty not to be mixed--"

"Pretty? *Chaz*? The amazing frog-boy?"

Hafidha frowned pityingly. "There are none so blind as will not see. Anyway, he's not done getting brown yet. Our Chaz is a sun-worshipper; I bet he spent that long weekend baking on the roof of his apartment building, to which he has--I happen to know--picked the lock. By the end of the summer he'll be caramel-sauce-colored, and you can watch the convenience store clerks try to speak to him in Spanish. It's fun. He goes, you know, like the top of the *crème brûlée*, when they've burnt it just right so there aren't any black spots, but it's all nice sweet crunchy melty brown sugar?"

Hafidha watched the emotions cross Daphne's face, and guessed that first, she was considering the possibilities. And then, she was considering just walking away from that one. But she said, "Isn't it politically incorrect to refer to people of color as food objects?"

Hafidha laughed. "Just don't expect me to stop calling you Peaches, Peaches."

Through the open door, Hafidha could see Reyes coming up the corridor from his office. Nearly time to go. She kicked off her shoes, scuffed on the flats, and unlocked the lower drawer of her desk. Her jump bag was in there, flowered green nylon wearing a thin coat of dust. And under it, lying beside the holster, was a field-stripped Glock and a box of ammo. She lifted the latter items onto the blotter and began to assemble her sidearm, aware Worth was watching curiously.

When she stood up and clipped the holster to her belt, the weight tugged that side of her slacks down. She sighed and clipped the Treo, the work cell, her nerd-light, and her Leatherman on to the other side, where they counterbalanced it... and further ruined the line of her suit.

At Hafidha's eyeroll and hand gestures, Daphne laughed. And then she looked Hafidha in the eye, all serious, and said, "Hafs? Do you have the hots for Chaz?

Hafidha rocked back on her heels. "Oh, God, no. I have the hots for *crème brûlée*."

Act II

The first notable thing Todd saw on the campus of the University of Nebraska at Omaha was the obligatory phallic obelisk. The second one was a smiling blonde way too young for the Iggy & The Stooges babydoll t-shirt she was falling out of. "The more things change," he muttered, and leaned forward over the back of the driver's seat of the inevitable dark purple 2003 Intrepid to tap Reyes on the shoulder. Briefly, he wondered who in procurement was getting the kickbacks from Dodge.

Then he wondered when purple got to be a government car color.

"We can't stop here. This is bat country."

At least Hafidha laughed. "That's Nevada, Duke."

"Nevada, Nebraska--"

"Don't let Chaz hear you say that." Lau, from the front seat, without looking up from the dossier in her lap. Sol, to everyone's amusement, puked if he tried to read in a moving car. "Let me guess. You still have nightmares about riding route 80 in the driving rain on a Harley, strung out on reds and megadoses of vitamin C."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, and sat back, satisfied. "I'd never use nutritional supplements off-label. My God, would you look at all these white people?"

He got Hafidha again, this time just as she was stuffing a doughnut hole into her mouth. It was worth a shower of crumbs, especially since Lau got the worst of it. And despite Hafidha's obvious culpability in the unscheduled flurry, Lau glared at Todd as she dusted cake out of her hair. Oh, the injustice.

"I hate to interrupt the camaraderie," Reyes said, "but once we get Hafidha installed, Lau, you take the victims' known associates. Todd, you and I are going to interview the victims."

"Just like the sixties," Todd said.

The car pulled up--on Dodge Street, synchronistically--in front of the administration building. Just like in the movies. Except here, the spaces were available because the curb was yellow. There was metered parking off to one side, but Reyes just slid an FBI don't-tow-me plaque onto the dash and the occupants exited on an internal count of three. Reyes didn't even have to cue them anymore; they started manipulating the instant they got off the plane.

The funny thing was, no matter how transparent Sol thought the psychological games were, they worked. *It's for their own good*, he told himself sardonically.

I'm sorry. Could you phrase the answer in the form of a question?

The steeply pitched convex dark roofs over each entryway made the building look as if one of its grandparents had been a merrywidow Queen Anne Victorian, and another a nice block of flats. Campus Security met them halfway up the walk, in the company of a balding and colorless blue-eyed administrator. Todd was in the second rank, behind Reyes, but the man's gaze found him automatically. "Doctor Reyes?"

"Doctor Reyes," Todd said, pointing to Reyes. "I'm Special Agent Todd."

Reyes stuck out his hand, impassive, and watched unsmiling as the administrator wrong-footed, stumbled, balked coming up to the jump, and somehow managed to get over it with only a hard rub and a wobble. "Doctor Reyes. Pleased to meet you."

"Winston Woodward?"

Todd could almost hear the *I presume?*

"Sorry," Woodward said. "I assumed from your name that you would be Latino, and-- well, there's no excuse."

As they turned to follow Woodward out of the sun, Hafidha tilted her head to bring her lips to Todd's ear and murmured, "*¿De cuál parte de México vienes, Doctor Reyes?*"

Todd bit his lip to keep from cracking up. Thank God they had Lau and Reyes along; he really hadn't ever mastered this professional demeanor thing. At least Woodward was still too flustered to notice, and talking fast: "Please, come inside, Doctor Reyes. And your team?"

"You've met Supervisory Special Agent Todd," Reyes said dryly. "This is Special Agent Lau, and this is Special Agent Gates, our technical expert. She'll need access to your network, and mainframe, if you still use one."

"Of course." Woodward rubbed his eyes. "I really hope you can help me, sir."

"So do I." Reyes straightened his tie, then smoothed his palm over tight-clipped curls as they advanced three abreast down a tiled corridor. Fidgeting. Uncomfortable, and Todd didn't think it was Woodward's unconscious, apologetic racism that had done it. Not for the first time, Todd wondered what had happened to get between Dr. Stephen Reyes and a brilliant academic career. He pretended to study a bulletin board which they passed, plastered with pastel flyers for campus clubs and events--the local SCA barony, a student band, a self-defense club, BiGALA. They were exactly like the flyers Todd remembered from his own tenure as an undergrad, except in that computer typesetting and modern printing and copying had vastly improved their apparent professionalism.

They turned into an outer office and walked past a vacant secretary's desk. "We'll know more once we've had a chance to talk to the victims."

Woodward, hand on his office door, hesitated. "Well," he said. "Then I also hope you can get something out of them."

*

Falkner crossed the bullpen, only two pizzas balanced on her left hand, because half the team was elsewhere. She set them down on the desk in the uninhabited office where the photocopier lived. Todd probably could have planted a flag in it based on seniority, but he claimed he didn't work well without constant supervision. There were pay grade rules about windows and cubicles and who got an actual office with an actual door, but the WTF wasn't exactly the fast track to promotion. And Falkner was proud of her people, who all seemed to think they had *important* things to worry about.

She didn't need to ding the service bell Brady had mounted on the wall beside the door. Chaz was already standing just outside. "Lunchtime?"

Behind him, she could see Brady stuffing a file into his locking drawer and setting the screen saver to blank his computer. Good man. He stood up, Worth a half-step behind--her hands already full of beverages--and followed Chaz into the room. "Time for the victimology?"

"Red rum and red sauce," Worth answered, while Chaz, with arms like derricks, reached down the napkins and the paper plates. "Thank you, Falkner."

"It's Friday," she said, and opened the first box: half pepperoni and half sausage, with green peppers and mushrooms on the lot. The second one was cheese and veg, and even though Lau wasn't here to help, Falkner thought Chaz would get through at least three quarters of it. Brady wouldn't eat anything that wasn't swimming in animal fat, and since none of the others would let Falkner hold the cheese, one pizza with artichoke hearts, black olives, sundried tomatoes, and garlic was her compromise.

Besides, Chaz liked vegetables. It always surprised her. He could no more live on them than a cat could, but as he'd said to her once when she'd raised eyebrows over his lunch of a Greek salad you could swim in and an entire loaf of garlic bread, "Just because I'm *going* to die of major organ failure by fifty, doesn't mean I need to *hurry* the process."

She could have done without the reminder that he and Hafidha were on borrowed time, but nothing ever got won by telling yourself pretty lies. The savage metabolisms that fed their slamming neurons would also eventually poison their livers and kidneys, if heart disease didn't get them first. Chances were, she and Reyes and Todd would outlive them both.

For every gift there is an answering burden.

She slid two slices of artichoke pizza onto the paper plate Brady handed her and took a diet Coke from Worth. Then she pulled out the chair in the corner between the table and the copier and sat, draping two napkins across her lap. "Right," she said. "Victimology. What have we got?"

Brady flipped open a reporter's notebook while he chewed. He swallowed, wiped his mouth, and ran a finger down the page, leaving a grease spot. "Okay, first known victim is Danielle Potter, age eighteen. Her suitemates had her committed in September, after she began acting erratically and they feared for her safety. No family history of mental illness; she was a good kid there on scholarship, first of her family to attend college. Second victim, Peter Gooding. Age seventeen, a week shy of his eighteenth birthday--"

"Young for a college freshman," Worth said.

Chaz *hmphed* around a mouthful of pizza. Identifying. Falkner made a face she hoped could be blamed on the diet Coke. She could hover over Chaz, but he was here now, and doing all right, and she couldn't change how he'd gotten there.

"Plenty of seventeen-year-olds graduate high school," Brady continued, so smoothly you could pretend you hadn't noticed him taking Chaz's side. He ate another bite of sausage pizza without moving his eyes from the notepad. "Gooding was always a bit of a smart, disaffected underachiever, according to his family. Parents divorced; mom worked full time; father remarried. Sounds like he didn't get a lot of guidance at home. Family became concerned when he didn't return home for Christmas break as planned. He was found wandering, incoherent, and brought into an emergency room on New Year's Eve. Suffering hypothermia and frostbite." A brief silence followed while Brady chewed.

"Did he lose any fingers?" Worth said.

"You mean like Todd?" Chaz said.

Brady snorted. "Villette, if you believe that frostbite story of Duke's, you're not much of a profiler. He wasn't pushing papers in the Quartermaster's Corps in 1973, either."

"There wasn't much of anything involving American troops going on in southeast Asia in 1973, was there?" Chaz asked.

Brady shrugged. "Officially. But it's not like Duke was ever anywhere interesting, to hear him tell it--"

Falkner cleared her throat. "Can we save the rumormongering until after the victimology, or preferably until Todd is here to defend himself?"

Chaz winced--sorry--and helped himself to the final two slices of veggie pizza by way of apology. "So. Gooding. Family history of mental illness?" He flipped the box closed left-handed and slid it out of the way with his elbow.

"Mother is on an SSRI," Brady said. He shrugged.

Falkner shrugged too. So was her husband Ben, and half their friends. The modern world stressed people out, and the medical system was adapted to jack them up, prop them up, and shoot them back out into play. She thought of race horses, doped to run when what they really needed was rest, and nailed that chain of thought before it could get away from her.

"Soma," Chaz said.

Worth gave him an odd look. "Soma's a muscle relaxant."

He shook his head, held up a hand, chewed vigorously, and reached for his coffee mug, only to find it empty. Worth pushed a spare Diet Coke at him, and he made a face and spurned it with his fingertips. "My liver does not thank you. No, not Soma Compound. Soma as in *Brave New World*. Aldous Huxley. Science fiction novel with a title from *The Tempest*. 'O brave new world that hath such creatures in't!' Plot revolves around drugging the populace to keep them from noticing a totalitarian regime headed by a charismatic psycho named Mustapha Monde? No? Dang, where's Todd when I need him--"

"Alphas, betas, and gammas," Falkner said, remembering the social ranks in the book, and was rewarded with a wink as Chaz started on piece number six.

"Victim three," Brady said. "Jeremy Hansen. Eighteen. A working-class kid, mother dead, father not remarried. Two siblings, attending college on savings and student loans. His girlfriend back home became concerned when he stopped answering her emails, sometime in March. No--"

"--family history of mental illness," Worth said. "Four and five?"

"Melanie Wosczyna," Brady said. "Nineteen. Commuter student, local family, worked nights at a doughnut shop. Her father's an alcoholic. In intermittent recovery, it sounds like. No schizophrenia, though, or family history of major mood disorders. She was found by Campus Security, holed up in the basement of the Fine Arts building in mid-April, hugging her knees and shivering. Sounds like she's a pretty good candidate for a PTSD case even beforehand. Her dad put her mom in the hospital at least once, and who knows what else went on?"

"I sense a trend," Falkner said, while Chaz started in on the first of the remaining four slices of meat pizza.

"You should consider doing this professionally," Brady said, and if Falkner hadn't been in a position of authority she would have flicked a spitball at him. "Victim number five, Hanson Cape. Age 19. Who is the only vic whose family has money, by the way, which could be a coincidence or could be a significant break in victimology. Mom is an eye surgeon; dad is a patent lawyer."

"Why's he going to a state school?"

"He washed out of Lawrence, in Appleton, Wisconsin. His grades were shall we say a little less than exceptional, so he was coming back for a second pass at his freshman year in the hopes of being readmitted to Lawrence as a transfer student later. It sounds like Mr. Cape likes girls, pot, and crew, not necessarily in that order. *He* attacked a T.A. in his Intro to Drama class in late May. Ten stitches in her face and two broken teeth."

"Ow." Worth's hand pressed her lips in sympathy. "Where's she?"

"Went home on a leave of absence," Brady said, checking his notes. "Hope she makes it back."

"Drug related psychotic break?" Chaz paused to pick a fennel seed from the sausage out of his teeth with a fingernail, while Falkner reminded herself

that it wasn't his fault nobody ever taught him table courtesy.

"Potter's and Hansen's families and associates, at least, are confident they weren't using."

Worth shrugged. "The parents are always the last to know."

Brady sharked a third slice of pizza. Chaz looked at him reproachfully, and Brady defended his plate like a lifer. "You got a whole pizza plus a slice!"

Chaz looked at Falkner. "Did you get any of those cinnamon things?"

"In the kitchen," Falkner said. She couldn't stand the smell of the icing while trying to eat cheese and tomato sauce.

Chaz rose, collecting his coffee mug and Brady's water cup. He appeared visibly thicker through the middle, like the family dog after Thanksgiving dinner. As always Falkner wondered if that wasn't more than a little uncomfortable. "Be right back."

Falkner glanced at her watch. Thirty seconds or less, she estimated, with amusement. He made it in twenty-three, balancing the box of cinnamon twists under one arm. Brady swiped one of those, too, but spurned the icing; Worth just shook her head. Falkner asked, "Do the victims have anything else in common? Club, major, residence, hobby, peer group?"

"Not from the paper," Brady said, while Chaz scooped frosting onto a cinnamon stick. "But they're all disaffected. Lonely, not loners?"

"Easy prey for a charmer," Chaz said. Worth lowered her chin to her hands to watch him eat. "Charismatic type, manipulative, make you feel like the center of the world. Until you'd do anything for him. We could be looking at a cult."

There were two cinnamon sticks left in the box. He pointed to them, and Falkner and Brady both shook their heads. Brady, Falkner noticed, had fallen silent too, and was also watching Chaz slowly and methodically alternate sips of coffee and bites of cinnamon twist.

Thirty seconds later, he broke a piece off the last cinnamon stick, tucked it into his mouth, and looked up, from face to face. Dawning worry lit his expression. He froze, and tried to use his coffee to clear his mouth, but the cup was empty again. "What's wrong?"

Worth shook her head wonderingly, without raising it from the backs of her fingers. "Wow," she said. "It's like watching a snake engulf a frog."

Chaz rolled his eyes and swallowed his mouthful stiffly. His Adam's apple bobbed hard enough to look like it hurt. "Shut up."

Worth stood and collected his cup. "I'll refill your coffee, Python."

"And I'll call the rest of the team," said Brady. "And fill them in on what we have."

*

"Tell me about schizophrenia," Hafidha said into her headset, while the fingers of her left hand skimmed fluidly on the scroll wheel of her mouse. "And I'll tell you about patterns of victim behavior."

Todd's voice came crisp and clear over her earpiece. "Reyes or Chaz could give you a better précis."

"But Reyes is driving you to the interview," Hafidha answered, reasonably. "And Chaz is eleven hundred and eighty-two miles away, approximate driving distance. So thrill me with your dulcet tones, Duke."

He snorted. "All right then. I'll put you on speaker, Hafs. Reyes, correct me if I'm wrong." He cleared his throat, and continued in professorial tones: "Common to most diagnoses of schizophrenia are a combination of positive, negative, and cognitive symptoms. Positive symptoms include what we think of as the defining characteristics of schizophrenia, such as auditory or less commonly visual hallucinations, delusions--especially paranoid ones--and racing thoughts. Negative symptoms reveal a drop in functionality, such as apathy, flattened affect, poverty of speech, increasing inability to navigate social situations, catatonia. In addition, although this is not yet considered diagnostic, the schizophrenic shows cognitive impairment, such as disorganized thinking, disorganized speech--"word salad"--failures of memory, and so on."

"Good," Reyes said, his voice attenuated by the directional mike.

"I've been reading the DSM-IV," Todd answered, complacently.

"Yes," Hafidha said. "And you have an MS in psych to go with your law degree, and the master's in comparative religion."

"I do? Damned senile dementia. Who can remember these things? Where was I?"

"Reading the DSM-IV."

"Right. Also, anecdotally, schizophrenics may abruptly drop a lot of weight, in part because they may not eat, and in part because--"

"An amped-up brain burns through glucose like whoa," Hafidha said, taking a bite out of a Ring Ding. *Hafidha 'the human tapeworm' Gates. If I ever get tired of cop work, I can go into hot dog eating contests*. "Maybe he's trying to turn them into jammers?"

"Jammers?"

"Anomaloids," she explained, reluctantly, sliding the ridiculous word out long and droopy. "Gammas."

She had said it flippantly, but the implication settled in on Todd's thoughtful silence. "Think you could?" he said, when she'd had plenty of time to frown at the other half of the Ring Ding and set it back on the wrapper with its doomed twin.

"*Make* a gamma? It makes me queasy to think about it. How much does a gamma brain scan look like a schizophrenic one?"

Reyes grunted noncommittally, which Hafidha took to mean, *Some.*

Todd changed the subject, because Todd did things like that. Unless he was conducting an interview, in which case, he only changed the subject to come back at you from a different angle. "What have you got on the school records and police blotter, Hafs?"

She rolled the mouse wheel again. "Nothing conclusive. Nothing coming up colors. If there's a sixth vic, I'm not finding them, and it's not like college students, even freshmen, have daily homework assignments we could track. I placed a couple of calls and emails to professors, though, and it does seem that each victim's class attendance dropped off for a week or so before he or she cracked. That's--what was your word, Duke?--anecdotal, though."

"Right," Reyes said. "So what do college freshmen do?"

"Try to find a community," Todd answered, promptly. "Look for mentors and friends. Find places to hang out."

"Join clubs," Hafidha said, and felt the click. "Don't even say it, I'm on it already. The thing is, if they'd each just joined some club before *It* happened to them, they might not be in the computerized membership lists."

"Legwork, Hafs? My heart bleeds."

"Hah," she answered. "Look, I'm going to call Lau and tell her to ask about social groups and extracurricular activities, okay?"

"Okay," Todd said. "I think we're here, anyway."

"Hafidha!" Reyes' voice stopped her, finger hovering over the disconnect.

"Last time I checked."

"Send the brain scans to Doctor Frost."

Oh yes. That would be the logical next step, and if Hafidha didn't tend to class Madeline Frost with the Boogeyman and the Grinch, she would have thought of it herself. She said, "*In ša' Allāh, sahib*," and hit the disconnect.

And then, after a moment to compose herself, during which she put the wounded Ring Ding out of its misery, she bit her thumb in the general direction of Johns Hopkins and hit 666 on her speed dial.

*

Madeline Frost, M.D., Ph.D., bent over a microscope, humming Thelonious Monk to herself as she examined a slide biopsied from a forty-month-old male. Histologically, the tumor was well-circumscribed, firm, and pinkish gray. The cells demonstrated a well-defined pattern of rosettes.

She could confirm a primary diagnosis of medulloblastoma.

It was unlikely the patient would survive to his fourth birthday.

She returned the slides to their case, made a note, straightened, and stripped her gloves. She'd call the oncologist from the phone in her office. She expected the news would come as a disappointment, but not a surprise.

As she was dropping the shed blue nitrile into a red bag, what she thought of as her government phone rang. In addition to her hospital phone and pager, Frost kept a separate cell for calls from the BAU.

She did not own a personal cell phone, and never felt the desire for one. People did not call Frost to chat.

She considered that a minor personal success.

The separate cell was not because of ritual, or because she was superstitious about contamination, or because she felt her work as an oncological pathologist needed psychological separation from her work as a *forensic* pathologist. It was because the instant the device sounded, she knew which set of rules she was meant to be operating under.

There would be a body, or perhaps several bodies, or perhaps parts of several bodies. They would be dead messily or mysteriously. They would present a perfectly intriguing puzzle, a pattern and a set of particulars to be worked out in detail and presented to the team.

It was challenging and satisfying, a welcome diversion.

Frost was fortunate that the chief pathologist was understanding of her sideline, as understanding as he was of her desire never to deal with a living patient as anything other than slides and specimens. Patients were fine, as long as they arrived in pieces.

Frost knew she was not good for living people, and she suspected that living people were not good for her.

Cancer offended her; it did not care for the rules. But it had its own rules, its own patterns. And Frost was very, very good at detecting those patterns, so others could use them to wage war.

It was not, after all, so different from what Stephen Reyes called *the anomaly*. That was a sort of cancer too, and it also offended her sense of the way the world ought to work.

She permitted the phone to go to voice mail, however. The call to the oncologist would not take long.

Once she had dispensed with it, leaving him to decide how to break the news and discuss treatment options with the family, she unclipped the silver phone from its hard case at her belt and hit redial without checking the time--one forty-three and seventeen seconds--or glancing at the number.

Hafidha Gates answered on the second ring. "Madeline Frost," Frost said.

"Check your email," Agent Gates said, without pleasantries. Frost appreciated that about Gates' dislike for her. It kept the interactions short.

"There's a .zip file with some brain scans. Can you see what you can tell me about them?"

"I'm checking now. Living brains?"

"Those are the kind we can scan for electrical activity, aren't they?"

"Not my specialty," Frost said. She slid behind her desk--she'd made her call from the front side--and began to type one-handed. The phone would take a Bluetooth headset. She ought to purchase one. "But I will have a look... These are diffusion tensor images, which record electrical activity in the white matter of the brain. And Agent Gates? These are green across the frontal cortex. All five of them."

"Green?"

"Color code. Assuming these are awake images, it indicates depressed levels of activity in the frontal cortex. And there are other--" She almost said *anomalous*, and checked herself. Clarity above convenience of speech. "--unusual patterns of activity consistent across all five."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm *not* qualified to diagnose, Agent Gates--"

"Doctor Frost," said Gates. "Are you qualified to speculate?"

"It's consistent with patterns of electrical activity seen in schizophrenics," she said, assured that Gates would know a speculation from an opinion.

"Gammas?"

"Show *increased* frontal lobe activity, in the limited sample available. As do you and Doctor Villette, Agent Gates. It's unmistakable, and this isn't it."

"Thank you," said Agent Gates.

"You are welcome," said Madeline Frost, because that was what one said to conclude a transaction, and severed the connection.

Act III

As they sat in a cramped observation room in the first of three mental institutions on their schedule for today, Todd flipped his phone closed.

"Well, if he's trying to make gammas, he's doing it wrong."

"Small mercies," Reyes answered, without moving his eyes from the one-way glass they sat behind. Beyond it, curled in an armchair in an interview room, sat Melanie Wosczyna.

She was a tall young woman, hunched now into a spasmed curve, her elbows cramped against her ribcage. She had a long neck and a long nose and a long jaw. The strong architecture of her face made her slack disaffected expression more terrible. Todd thought she should have been working on smile lines by thirty. Over her pallor, her complexion was olive. Fluffy-curly brown hair was matted flat on one side, and her right hand twitched convulsively, first two fingers and thumb pressed together and jerking like the beak of a hungry bird.

Todd would have touched Reyes' elbow, but Reyes had already seen it. "Come on," he said, standing, and Todd fell in behind him, making his sure his footsteps didn't fall in the same rhythm. A whole different playbook with a victim than with a suspect. Here, they came as potential rescuers. As friends. Not to intimidate.

Melanie was medicated. She didn't look up as they entered, but her hand jittered faster. Todd knew his part in the scenario; he was the supportive observer. *'Deferential, glad to be of use, politic, cautious, and meticulous.'* A battered couch stood against the wall, perpendicular to the desk and armchair. Todd assumed it, while Reyes moved across the small room silently to the knotted-up girl in the battered, burnt-orange chair.

Todd found himself wondering, as he often did, if institutions such as this one chose their furnishings with an eye towards repeat business. He had an uneasy Socialist inkling that when they reached the private institution where Hanson Cape was being cared for, they would find more appealing surroundings.

Reyes, with every appearance of unselfconsciousness, dropped a knee and crouched beside the victim's chair. "Hey, Melanie," he said, in conversational tones. "I'm Stephen. How are you?"

Not *Agent Reyes*. Not *Doctor Reyes*. No, softer and more oblique, an avuncular approach. This was the girl whose father was a likely-abusive

binge drunk; Todd watched with respect as Reyes made himself seem small and soft and positioned himself so she had an escape, if she wanted it.

She didn't acknowledge him overtly, but Todd saw the dip of her eyelashes as her gaze slipped sideways. The antipsychotics were having some effect, and so was the Reyes charisma.

Her right hand jittered faster.

"Melanie," Reyes said, "do you understand me?"

Her mouth opened, and she made a sound that wasn't quite a wordless complaint, and also wasn't quite glossolalia. And then she said, with soft absolute clarity, "It's the rats."

"Melanie?"

"I can hear the rats underground. It smells like a ghost train. Can you smell it? And then there were cigarettes."

Not exactly word salad, either. But when Reyes gave Todd a tight sharp glance over his shoulder, Todd nodded. Disorganized thinking, loose or disassociated chains of speech. As if the subject were having difficulty stringing together coherent logic.

A check mark in the box.

In the meantime, Melanie was staring at Reyes as if she were absolutely captivated by whatever he might choose to impart.

Reyes looked her calmly in the eye and asked, "What are the rats saying?"

Melanie shook her head, jerky as a broken toy. "Baker, baker," she said, voice unresonant. A crushed guitar. "Is that your girl? Think she'll wait? We'll get you home. Hang on. Hang on."

Todd put his fingers to his mouth. Again--or still--with her hand. The motion, distressingly familiar.

"The rats are saying, 'baker?'" Reyes reached out and lifted her left hand, which was not moving in sympathy with the right. She looked at where he touched her--stared at it--but did not draw her hand away.

Todd was reminded of a seductive cult leader he'd known once, among whose disciples he'd lived, briefly and under cover. Reyes had that same

charisma when he wanted it, that way of looking at you like you were the only important person on earth and the center of his world.

"I don't understand rat," she said. "It's a language I don't know. But they're talking about me down there. They got baker. They got clement. The ghosts need me. To tell their stories. Nobody cares about the ghosts. Nobody wants to tell their stories. They have to hear. It's for their own good."

Reyes rocked back, allowing her hand to drop back to her knee. Hallucinating schizophrenics not infrequently heard voices, or received strange instructions in code.

Todd hadn't heard of one hallucinating languages she didn't understand. Usually, under schizophrenic patterning, *everything* made sense. Too *much* sense, terrible towering inescapable inexorable sense.

"There's more death than on the wall," she said. "Plenty came home dead, just walking. The kids ran through fire. Right through it. And kept running. Burning. Baker, clement, mack. I fell off the wall. And all the King's horses."

Speaking of sense. She *made* sense, after a fashion. That was a terribly consistent stream of consciousness, when you got right down to it. And okay, she was medicated; she should be able to pull it together. But there was something about the pattern of what she was saying.

"If you crawl in a grave," Melanie said, "you come out dead the other side."

Todd concentrated on the motions of her hand, trying to isolate. No. It wasn't the motion of the hand. It was the motion of the fingers.

"Reyes," he said. "Look at her *hand*."

Reyes looked. "Give her your pen."

"Great," Todd said. "Let's provide the psychotic with a weapon." He pulled the green disposable roller ball from his jacket pocket and added his reporter's notebook, from the same supply that Brady had recently started filching from. In a moment, they had set up Melanie with both the writing implement and the writing surface, and she was staring at the page as if she meant to eat it. Then she looked away, eyes snapped up as if sighting on the horizon. And her hand began to move as if she had no idea it was tracing letters.

Baker, she wrote painstakingly. Clemente. Mac.

"Automatic writing," Todd said.

"Names," Reyes said, looking at him. "Names."

When it struck Todd, it hit like a lightning bolt, so hot and shocking he could not believe it had taken him that long. His hands went cold; the four walls of the room wobbled woozily as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Names on a wall," he said, and shook his head. "Names on *the* Wall."

"The Vietnam Memorial." Reyes scrubbed a hand across the tight curls of his receding hair. "And one that fell off it."

"Rats in tunnels." Todd bit off the words. "Speaking a language you don't know."

"Jesus." Reyes rubbed his mouth. "So why is a teenaged girl having post-traumatic flashbacks to Vietnam?"

"I don't know."

She looked up at Todd and blinked, clear hazel eyes, affectless expression. "Don't you remember?" she said. "You were there."

*

Todd could still taste that bile in the hall, ten minutes later. "Do we check the rest?"

Reyes nodded. "Make sure of the pattern. Oh, and get on the horn to Hafidha--"

"Baker, Clemente, Mac." Todd couldn't help but contrast the tenderness Reyes showed the victim with his current brusqueness, and wonder which was the lie. "MacDonald? MacAllister? MacLeod? Four Marines on a fireteam."

"Who's the fourth one?"

"Yeah," Todd answered. "I was wondering that myself."

*

"Right," Hafidha said into the phone, grateful that Reyes could not see her roll her eyes. "Yeah, two and a half names, all maybe in the same squad in

the 'Nam. All maybe KIA. You need the other name and a half? Well, *Kemo Sabe*, I'm afraid we have a little problem here. No, the campus network is down. Yes, even a miracle worker needs a network. I'll call Worth and get Quantico on it, though. It's Friday night, *Il Professore*, how long do you think it's going to take?"

*

Nikki Lau was really good at the part with the grieving friends and families. She had a knack for it, a gift as absolute as Falkner's perfect pitch or Madeline Frost's time sense accurate to the second.

Being good at it, doing it all the time, didn't make it any less awful.

When she walked back into Hafidha's appropriated office, toting a short ton of Chinese takeout, she must have been showing it, because Reyes, of all people, grunted a greeting and pulled the box out of her arms. Lau stood inside the doorway, chafing her arms, trying to shake off an unseasonable chill. "I hope I didn't get too much," she said. "No Chaz."

"You have me," Hafidha answered brightly, snagging a tray of General Tso's chicken and a carton of rice right-handed while she grabbed up chopsticks with the left. "Paper plate?"

Reyes ducked out into the lounge and came back with Todd while Lau pulled plates from under the pile. She watched Hafidha and the other two scraping food out of containers and folded her arms across her chest. She didn't have any appetite of her own, though Hafidha was already on her second helping.

Lau startled when Todd put a plate of rice and Buddha's Delight in her hands, the partially-missing fingers folded under automatically. He hid it better than James Doohan: she'd known him six months before she'd realized he was maimed, and when she asked about it he'd told some improbable Vonnegutesque story about following a girl who didn't love him to a communal farm in New Hampshire, and nearly freezing and/or starving to death the first and only winter. "*Mangia*," he said. "Tea?"

"Yikes, yes," she said. He spun a chair for her; she sank into it, and balanced the plate on her knees. Once she started shoveling rice and bean sprouts and bamboo shoots and bell pepper and tofu and cornstarch sauce into her mouth, she almost couldn't stop to accept the tea cup. She realized she was shivering, cold as if she'd managed to get sunburned, but the tea helped.

"You know," Hafidha said, around a mouthful of fried animal protein, "*we* have an excuse for the blood sugar crashies. What happened to you?"

"Three victim family interviews and four friends in six hours," Lau answered. She realized she was talking with her mouth full, chewed, and swallowed. "I couldn't eat."

"It's easier when they're dead," Reyes said, between bites of spring roll. "What did you learn?"

She'd gotten around another mouthful of broccoli and tofu in the meantime. This time, she had recovered herself enough to hold up her hand and stall for time while she swallowed. "Nothing holds across the board," she said. "No consistent clubs or interests or sports. There's just one thing that, well, it's not exactly a consistency, but it's an echo. Of sorts. Two of the victims, Wosczyna and Gooding, had recently been victimized in other ways. Gooding got mugged at knifepoint on Spring Break in Fort Lauderdale, and Wosczyna had her car broken into, her laptop and some other things stolen."

"Somebody could have tracked her through the laptop," Hafidha said. She reached out sideways and patted her own machine, which sat quietly generating fractal screensavers.

"Hafidha," Reyes said, "check if the other victims were recent complainants in any kind of police report, would you?"

Her eyebrows went up, and her plate went down. She spun her chair around, fingers flying. "Argh. Dammit, boss, the network's still down. Let me try the PC..." She pushed her laptop aside and pulled the flimsy keyboard and mouse of the local Windows machine over with a discernable grimace. "Nope, nothing. I guess it's the old-fashioned way."

She snagged the phone off the desk, pulled a number two Ticonderoga pencil out of her braids, and began pushing buttons with the eraser, mouthing "They had better not assume I'm your secretary" at Reyes while she did.

Todd, Lau noticed, had stopped eating his spring roll. Reyes obviously noticed too, because he was staring at Todd, waiting for him to speak.

"Flyer," he said, as if he had been searching his memory banks for the word, and Reyes' eyes went wide. He stood up, set his plate aside, and barreled out of the dark cramped little room.

Hafidha hung up the phone and said, "All five of them. And before you ask, no, the DOD has not come through with that list of names yet."

Lau stood up to go after Reyes, but Todd held up a hand. "He's coming right back."

And so he was, wearing a single latex glove, a sheet of pale purple paper in the hand it covered. "Bag."

Lau, who had already set her food aside, produced one, and held it open until Reyes sealed up the flyer and two push pins and labeled the bag in indelible marker. He handed it to her, and she turned it around and read what was printed on the front.

BE AFRAID NO MORE

Practical self-defense
FOR EVERYONE

Seeing is believing
NO GIMMICKS

Milo Bail Student Center
Room 114
EVERY FRIDAY
7:00 PM

"That's next door," said Hafidha, craning over Lau's shoulder.

Lau checked her watch. 8:18.

Todd was reaching for his jacket, Hafidha for her reinforced laptop case. Reyes was already out the door.

*

The four of them jogged in two rows, but didn't quite break into a run. Hafidha's sidearm bounced against her hip; the rest of her gear counterweighted it on the other side. The laptop swung with every stride, and adrenaline buzzed in her ears.

She'd missed this, and she wouldn't admit she missed it. Not in front of Reyes, who'd given her a place when developments beyond her control had

converted her from an asset to the Secret Service to the sort of person adjudged a liability.

Most of the time, she had a pretty good line of patter in convincing herself that her new job and her new gifts made up for what they'd cost her: a job she'd loved, a normal life expectancy, reasonable grocery bills, and a guy who couldn't handle it when his lover started seeing and doing things other people didn't.

Most of the time.

The Milo Bail Student Center was a geometric concrete structure in the brutalist style, surrounded in the long north latitude summer evening by strolling and rough-housing undergrads. "We can't get into guns drawn here," Todd said, with a glance over his shoulder.

"No," Reyes answered, which might mean, *yes, you're right, we can't have a shootout here*, and might mean *thank you, I have considered your objections and dismissed them.* Todd jerked his head straight and patted his holstered sidearm. He didn't pop the snap, though.

Hafidha kept her own hands well away from the paddle holster of her Glock. "Do we call campus security?"

Reyes shook his head as if Hafidha should have known better than to ask. *Stephen Reyes?* El Generalissimo? *Share authority?* He said, "In here."

Todd was last through the door, glancing over his shoulder before he followed, covering their backs. Brady might insist on being the last man in line, but whether he was there or not, Hafidha appreciated that nobody got on their tail unnoticed while Todd was on the job.

As he caught up with them in the corridor, he said, "Guys, if this is a Vietnam vet targeting college students, and he's arranged a mentoring relationship with them, then based on the language in his flyer I think we need to consider the scenario Chaz presented, and be prepared for a charismatic leader situation."

"Charismatic leader?" Hafidha asked.

"Cult," Reyes said. "We have to get him away from the kids."

"Or?"

"Or they might sacrifice themselves to protect him. He will certainly be willing to sacrifice *them*." Todd's face was paper-colored, his lips bloodless.

"I heard Falkner was at Waco," Lau said, voice taut.

Todd nodded. "You heard right. You ever hear of a place called Jonestown, Guyana?"

Hafidha and Lau both nodded. Before her time, but not forgotten; the site of a mass murder/suicide of almost a thousand followers of the charismatic leader, Jim Jones. Hafidha resolved to google it up when she had Internet access again, and see if she could figure out what exactly was making Todd look like a binge drinker with room-spins. "You're saying he's brainwashed them."

"Common misconception," Reyes said. "It's not really brainwashing, not in the Hollywood sense. It's the imposition of a communal reality. Creating a sense of belonging. In-group versus out-group. Manipulation of the bonding impulse. Everybody wants to feel chosen."

Todd put a hand on Reyes' arm. "Remember," he said. "They're just a bunch of stupid kids."

*

When they came down the hall, Reyes knew he was already too late. Students stood in clusters outside room 114, chatting in groups of three or four. He took the nearest--a blond boy, five-eleven, one-eighty, gay, probably a Chemistry major by the caffeine molecule on his t-shirt--by the sleeve and turned him away from his boyfriend, ready for whatever reaction might follow. The kid dropped effortlessly into a balanced pose, his left hand moving to intercept an anticipated blow, the right turning to knock Reyes' left hand away.

Reyes, prepared, stepped back before the kid made contact. Whatever else, the potential UNSUB *was* teaching his students to take care of themselves.

Reyes asked, "Is the instructor still here?"

"Jim?" The boy blinked gray-blue eyes. "No, he went that way." He pointed down the hall. "With the advanced students. The wheelchair ramp, but he left ten--"

Reyes took off running, his team strung out behind him, Hafidha gaining with every stride of her long legs and the rest holding position. Undergrads flattened themselves against the corridor walls as Reyes bawled *Coming through! Coming through!*

Todd was yelling something too, maybe *make a hole*, while the women saved their breath for running. It didn't matter. When they reached the sidewalk, there was no one in sight except undergrads, moving industriously in the narrow space between red brick buildings. Evening was drawing up, a gray northern lengthening of the shadows.

"Wheelchair ramp," Reyes said, and Lau turned around and looked at it.

She said, "The self-defense instructor is in a wheelchair?"

"Vets," Todd said, shoving his left hand into his pants pocket in something Reyes thought was an unconscious gesture, "wind up missing a lot of body parts."

Reyes rocked on feet bruised sore from running on pavement in dress shoes. "Hafidha, I need to know who reserved that room--"

She already had her cell to her ear. She held up one finger, mumbling into the mouthpiece, and then said "Thank you" in a tone that didn't mean *thank you* at all and shook her head. "Network," she said, thumbing the red button, frustration dripping from every word. "Friday night at supper time. *Nebraska*." That last with infinite bitterness, though Reyes would wager that the IT departments of plenty of east coast colleges wouldn't have acquitted themselves any better. "I'll call Worth, one sec, and see if she has that squad roster for us yet--Daph, any luck? Oh, for the love of Mike. Hey, can you transfer me? No, I'll handle it. No, honey, you're doing *fine*, they just think they can walk on you because you aren't me. Transfer, please?"

What followed was one of the most polite ass-reamings Stephen Reyes had ever made it his pleasure to hear. By the time Hafidha was done, even Todd was looking at her with respect, and Lau had dilated pupils.

"Macgillivray," she said, finally, after a listening pause. "And the fourth fireteam member was James Cauldwell."

"James," said Lau.

Reyes said, "*Jim*."

Hafidha continued relaying: "All members of the 258th Marine Brigade; all saw service in Vietnam 1971-1972. The first three killed, the fourth critically wounded in April of 1972. Weren't we *out* of Vietnam by then?"

"Easter Offensive?" Reyes asked, looking at Todd.

Todd nodded. "Military advisors."

Hafidha looked between them. "I wasn't *born* yet," she said. "Okay, I have Quantico searching for a local address for Cauldwell. And--nothing. Wanna bet he's using an alias?"

"No bet," Reyes said. He turned, began to pace. "I cannot *believe* he's out there somewhere with potential vics, and we're stuck here at the mercy of a flaky network."

"It's like those nightmares where you're running up stairs ahead of the monster," Hafidha said.

Reyes whirled at the end of an arc, shook his head. "All right, next step. Todd, Lau. Head back in and interview as many students as possible. Maybe one of them knows where he takes the kids."

Todd and Lau nodded and withdrew. Todd still had his maimed hand fisted in his pants pocket. Reyes thought, *Someday, Solomon, I will determine which of your stories are truth, and which are fiction.*

"I've got another idea," Hafidha said, unlimbering her laptop. "This is a college campus. *Somebody's* got a wildcat Wi-Fi set up. And I saw warchalk on the way in."

"Warchalk?"

Hafidha plumped down on the concrete where the building would cast a shadow over her screen, "Quoth Wikipedia, warchalking is: 'the drawing of symbols in public places to advertise an open Wi-Fi wireless network.' As opposed to those non-Wi-Fi wireless networks. They're hobo signs for geeks. Let me see what I can find."

Act IV

Nothing, at first, though Hafidha was giving herself a headache from grinding her teeth. It *had* to be out there, though; she could see the paired

semicircles from where she sat, chalked in yellow under a protective overhang, and she needed a network *that bad*. "Come on, baby," she said, petting the contact pad, ignoring the grumbles of her gastric system. "Find it."

Reyes leaned over her shoulder as if fascinated, even though she wasn't doing anything interesting. Hafidha grimaced and scooted a little left, closer to the symbol. If the Wi-Fi node ran off the campus network, she was hosed.

Somebody's baby's *mind* was at stake. She could not afford to be hosed.

Lau trotted back down the steps, vaulting the rail rather than making the turn. "Todd is getting the names of the five students he took with. At absolute worst we can contact families, get cell numbers, and start *calling* them. Get APBs out on their cars, if they didn't all travel in the same vehicle."

"Six in a single car?" Hafidha asked, without raising her eyes from the screen.

"Wheelchair," Reyes said. "Van."

Hafidha took a deep breath, shifted her buttocks again, let her fingertips hover over the keys, and prayed. *Please just two bars of signal. Please. Just two bars--*

As if someone had heard her, or that last scooch to the left had made the difference, blue dots flickered into existence at the bottom of the screen. Two, three, *five* glorious bars. "Hah!" she said. "Okay, I have it. Ten seconds."

In fact, the entire network seemed to have risen from the grave, and Hafidha silently retracted everything mean she had said about the IT department of the University of Nebraska, Omaha. She logged in, flipped to student activities, and in under six seconds had the name of the student organization that had reserved the room. And the names of its officers. And--

"James Baker," she said, and Reyes slapped his forehead.

"God damn," he said. "He's using the name of one of his buddies. Okay, check all four names, and all potential combinations for local addresses. Lau--"

But she had already vanished inside to fetch Todd.

In the car, on the way to Baker né Cauldwell's address, Hafidha's laptop maintained perfect signal, and--sitting in the back seat, typing away like a mad thing while Reyes drove--she shook her head at the miracle. Reyes was muttering something into his headset. Lau stared out the rear passenger-side window with stern concentration.

Todd, on the horn to one of Reyes' carefully selected sympathetic federal judges, was explaining that they were enroute to the home of a suspect linked to several victims whose families were prepared to swear they had been abused into emotional breakdowns, and would she please be so kind as to have her secretary fax the warrant to this number so Hafidha could print it out en route, yes I know it's Friday night, sorry my cell got dropped, yes that was me, I called back, witnesses place him in the company of five young people right now and there may be civilians in danger in the house as we speak, please send it on? Oh, thank you.

"What would we do without collusion?" Lau asked.

Reyes snorted through his nose.

"Uck," Todd said, staring at his closed phone, a muscle twitching in the corner of his jaw. "I kind of miss the Fourth Amendment."

"I am become Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds," Hafidha said, sympathetically. "*El Jefe,* honey, do we want to send Omaha PD on ahead?" Her stomach rumbled again. She rubbed it, mourning the half-eaten dinner back at the university. She was still hungry enough to feel dizzy, and she'd gone through her stash of almonds and peanut butter crackers already.

Damned beta metabolism. It sounded like fun until you had to live with it.

"No," Reyes said. "I don't want to send in a bunch of uninformed, unsupervised alphas when this could go cattywumpus in ways we can't begin to articulate. Tactical can meet us at the house. We go in together."

"Six of them," she reminded, and touched her gun. "Four of us."

"One of them," Reyes said. "Five potential hostages. Four of us."

She checked the laptop again, and the GPS. "Five minutes inbound. I wish Brady were here. Okay, more info. Cauldwell, or Baker, has been teaching

that self-defense class for *seventeen* years. Under an assumed name the whole time. Go figure."

"Maybe he was hiding from the government," Todd said, dryly. "He's not registered with the local VA."

"He must have converted over the summer. Oh. Here. Isn't this interesting. Jessica Cauldwell. Age 34. Local resident. UNO graduate, actually. Raped and murdered in her home in June of last year--"

"His *daughter*?" Lau asked, incredulous. "Please, tell me he didn't."

"No," Hafidha said, and Lau let out a long shuddering breath. "They caught a perp, DNA match. Actually, the BAU were involved; she was his third vic. But none of this makes any sense. Why was he using an alias seventeen years before he apparently converted?"

Reyes said, "He was concealing his identity from his daughter. I bet you'll find he started teaching that self-defense class around the time she matriculated. He wanted to be close enough to keep an eye on her, and she didn't know him and had some reason to think she didn't want to know him. Mom unhappy about getting half a husband back from the war?"

"I won't take that bet," said Todd, shoulders rising around his ears.

Hafidha's stomach clenched. "God, does anybody have a candy bar? I'll pay back with interest."

Todd reached back into the pocket where he'd stowed the cell phone, and came up with a Twix. He handed it to her diagonally across the car with his left hand. Hafidha snatched the candy. Sol had started the wrapper for her, which was the only reason she could manage it with shaking fingers. She shoved chocolate-coated cookie twigs into her mouth, barely chewing, smearing her fingers and face like a child's. "God, not enough. Send peanuts. Anything."

When she lifted her head, she caught sight of Reyes' steady gaze in the mirror. "Doctor Stephen, are you driving?"

"Hafidha," he answered, "what on earth are you using as a Wi-Fi spot?"

"It's the same Wi-Fi spot."

"For the last fifteen miles?"

Hafidha's racing thoughts crashed like the Three Stooges coming up to a flight of stairs. Her hands reached for the keyboard, jerked back, fell to the sides. "Oh," she said, in a very little voice. "Campus network. City network? Omaha have municipal Wi-Fi?"

"I just got off the phone with President Woodward," Reyes said. "He mentioned that the university network is still down. How are you feeling back there, Hafidha?"

Oh god. A catastrophic wave of understanding shook her. She grabbed the lid of the laptop and pulled it nearly shut without powering the machine down.

Reyes' eyes were still seeking hers in the mirror, and how the hell was he driving the car? But he didn't pull over, and he didn't turn around.

It was, on one level, a tremendous display of trust. His back was to her. She was sitting immediately behind him, and even though Lau and Todd had turned to stare, neither one had a weapon in hand.

"I feel like me?" He watched her in the mirror, silent. Waiting for what she'd say next. "Would I know, if--?"

"I don't know," Reyes said. "What do you think is going on?"

"Breakthrough," she said, looking down at the logo on the lid of the laptop on her knees, jammed against the back of his seat. The printer, between her feet, began to chatter. "I'm manifesting. A real manifestation, not a half-assed one like seeing colors. An external ability."

"Hafs," Lau said, back against the passenger door. Todd's hand was inside his jacket. She didn't blame them at all.

She said, "The network is me."

"I concur," Reyes answered. And then he glanced sideways at Todd, and continued, "This could be a normal stage of the beta cycle, okay? Don't freak yourself out."

"Maestro?"

"Yeah?"

She held up her hand. Her big silver ring spun loosely on her finger. Her watchband drooped from her wrist. "I'm really, really hungry, man."

"Okay." He turned down a side street. Reflexively, Hafidha checked the GPS. They were still headed the right way. "We're on a timeline, here. I need you. If we don't stop, are you going to eat anybody in the car?"

Not a joke. Not given some of the things they'd seen over the years. Rather, a perfectly reasonable request for vital information. The fact that they had a job where that *was* a perfectly reasonable request for vital information notwithstanding.

Hafidha's hands tightened convulsively on the edges of the laptop. "No. I think I can survive without resorting to cannibalism. Lau, don't think I didn't see you reach for that gun--"

"Actually," Lau said, and handed Hafidha two fortune cookies, palmed from her pocket. She must have shoved them there on the way out the door.

"Marry me," Hafidha said, and ripped the first one out of the wrapper.

"Eat fast," Reyes ordered, pulling the purple Intrepid to the curb in a semi-rural residential neighborhood on the outskirts of town. Hafidha glimpsed cornfields through the cottonwood trees behind the ranch-style houses. "We're here. Unless you need to wait in the car."

"Not on your life," Hafidha said, through crumbs. "Sorry, chief." In her best Max Smart. *He was letting her come with them?*

Yes, of course. Where the team could keep an eye on her. Where the guns were, if everything went wrong.

Reyes was a gambler at heart. And you never won big unless you risked big. That was the way the game was rigged.

Hafidha tore the warrant off the printer one-handed. The appropriate house was immediately obvious: half a block down the street, and the only one with a van with handicapped plates in the driveway, and a wheelchair ramp up to the front door.

"Do we go hard?"

"He's a cornered gamma," Reyes said, as two tactical vans pulled up behind them. "What do you think?"

All the shades in the unassuming white ranch were drawn, and behind them, all the lamps in every room seemed lit. In a movie, there might have been a

shadow cast against the curtains to tell them where the bad guy was. But all they had was speed and ten SWAT guys in black armor and face masks.

Lau and Reyes went down the street informing the residents to bring their kids and pets inside, though Hafidha was certain that the instant they turned away, faces would be appearing in every front-facing window.

Doors are not as easy to kick down as they look on TV, and Brady was back in Virginia. But nobody needs melodrama when they have a hooligan tool. Todd retrieved the fireman's forcible-entry wrecking bar from the trunk while Hafidha was velcroing her body armor on, and the team split up. Half the SWAT group and two Federal agents each front and back.

Hafidha went to the front, with Todd. Reyes watched her walk away through narrowed eyes. She felt it like a pressure coming off her shoulders when he turned away.

It was okay. Duke would keep an eye on her.

Reyes and Lau reported that they were in position at the back door. Todd inserted the claws of the hooligan tool into the crack around the door and twisted it to pop the lock. The doorframe splintered on the bolt, and the panel swung heavily inward. "FBI!" Hafidha shouted. "Federal Agents!"

She swung left as Todd swung right, clearing the living room--all tile floors and plenty of room for a wheelchair--pushing back, the SWAT guys a widening arc behind them. "Clear," Todd called, and she yelled back an affirmation. A sunporch on her side. Reyes' voice from the kitchen. And then from across the living room, Todd: "Here, here. Federal Agent! Mister Cauldwell, we have a warrant--"

Hafidha spun, crossed the living room, ducking between SWAT guys to reach Todd, silhouetted in a doorway leading to an empty space beyond. She came up beside him, hard hold, front stance, the Glock locked at the apex of a modified Weaver grip. Todd sidestepped to make room. The two of them filled the door.

This must once have been the den.

Now it was an empty room with a white tile floor. A broad-shouldered double amputee of about sixty, cheekbones bright through his skin above the beard, sat in a manual wheelchair at the far end. A young man knelt beside

him. Four other students crouched on the floor between Cauldwell and the door like huddled frogs, pens in their hands, each bent over scattered sheets of the same eight-and-a-half-by-eleven paper that was stacked against each wall. Piles of it, all covered over with handwriting, the paper crumpled and randomly arrayed.

They were writing, each one scribbling away as if oblivious to the SWAT officers and the shouting FBI agents, as if writing--relentlessly, with tongues protruding in concentration--were the only way to stop the end of the world.

The student who knelt by Cauldwell, an Asian boy who looked like he should still be in high school, wrote also. His paper was propped on the armrest of the wheelchair, and he seemed oblivious to the fact that Cauldwell held a Ka-bar fighting knife against his throat, stroking his hair with the other hand.

The room was brilliantly lit by torchieres and a hanging chandelier. Hafidha could see the vacant expressions, the tears shining on the student's cheeks. The creak of SWAT officers breathing behind her was almost drowned out by the buzz of adrenaline's ugly, alluring song.

Awful.

She was an awful human being to miss this *so much.*

She cleared her throat and said, "James Cauldwell. Federal agents. Put down the knife."

As, beside her, Todd said, "*Reyes*," and stepped to the side as Reyes and Lau came up through the SWAT team.

Act V

The children just kept writing. Hafidha had the shot. Reyes told himself he was only worried about the knife. The knife, and five children scratching words on paper. "James Cauldwell?" he said.

"Don't tell me. You're from the government and you're here to help." Cauldwell stroked the hair of the boy in his lap. He was gray-haired, bearded, his upper body massive from using his arms for everything his legs could no longer do for him. He must have been getting adequate nutrition because he still carried that muscle, though his face had been whittled gaunt

by his illness. He had light eyes, framed by a squint, and his button-down shirt was open at the collar.

He looked like Santa Claus.

"James. I'm Stephen Reyes. I'm with the FBI and I need you to put the knife down now, man. Nobody's died. You haven't done anything that can't be fixed." A patent lie, with five children in mental institutions, but you used what you had. "Nobody has to die. We want to get you some help." Reyes had three good agents at his back, and a hallway full of SWAT guys. He tipped his head at Hafidha: tall, implacable, a comic-book heroine in her black jeans and ballistic vest and beaded yellow-streaked this-a-way that-a-way braids. "But you should know that my partner here is a very good shot."

"Bullets," Cauldwell said. "Who cares?"

Carefully, feeling his way, Reyes slipped his semiautomatic back into the high-impact plastic holster on his left hip. It clicked as it settled into place, and he brought his left hand back up slowly. "Is this how you teach your students to defend themselves?"

Cauldwell lifted the restraining hand from the boy's hair, but the boy stayed crouched before him, pressing his throat willingly to the blade of Cauldwell's knife. "I teach them to take care of themselves. I teach them to fight. It's for their own good. It's a jungle out there."

He laughed at his own joke; Reyes schooled himself not to wince at it. "I met one of your students at the college," Reyes said. "You teach them how to defend themselves, all right. And I met another one of your students at a mental institution. Melanie. What did you teach *her*?"

"I taught her to remember," Cauldwell said. He touched the hair of the boy writing beside him. "This is Peter. His parents were refugees. It might have been me that made them refugees. Peter is a medium. His spirit guides put him in touch with the other side."

"His spirit guides," Reyes said. "Baker. Clemente. Macgillivray."

"They can teach you about the jungle. They try protect us all," Cauldwell said. "But there are too many of us. They would teach you, too."

Cauldwell used Peter's name. He personalized him. Not just for Reyes. For himself. "James," Reyes said. "Listen to me. Put down the knife. You don't

want to hurt Peter. I know you don't."

Cauldwell shivered. "Nobody can protect him. You can't protect him, Stephen Reyes. I've tried. I've tried to save him."

Todd and Hafidha still had the door. Lau was right behind them. Reyes gritted his teeth, thought about their line of fire, and said, softly, gently: "The way you couldn't protect Jessica?"

Cauldwell looked into Reyes' eyes, and Reyes feels the reach. The touch, the hard clutch, *the black-water calm of the anomaly. And then jungle, sweat, heat, swamp, savagery. The way the knife goes into flesh, the scrape on bone and the suck when you pull it free. The burning children. The trickles of red thin blood left behind when you pry loose the leeches. The young refugee women, so emaciated they look like old men. The hard bulge of a fat tick in your ear, filling the canal, too swollen on blood to pry loose in the field.*

You can feel the legs wriggling, sometimes.

"Exorcise it," Cauldwell says. "It's okay. Give it voice. Give them voice. Exorcise them. Here. I'll show you. You have to learn, Stephen Reyes. It's for your own good. *You can't save anyone."*

He raises the black, glittering, enormous pen, brandishes it with a dramatic flourish. A sheet of white paper spreads, waiting, across his lap, ready to be scribed with red irrevocable words.

"No," Reyes cries, lunging forward, because of course what the gamma has in his hand *isn't a pen--*

The loudest sound in the world knocked Stephen Reyes to his knees.

*

The knife rose. Reyes dove, impossibly far. There were still four victims on the floor between him and Cauldwell and the hostage.

Hafidha rolled her finger on the trigger.

Gamma.

She fired once. Twice. Cauldwell's powerful shoulders bulged as he heaved himself up in the chair, lifting the knife. Thrice. A fourth time. He might be dead already, but four bullets would not stop him. *Gamma*. Hafidha was in

front of Lau, and Reyes lunged up into her line of fire. "Dammit!" Somehow, she stopped the fifth shot. Sent it into the ceiling, upward jerk of her hands. Shit. Not gun safety, man. *"REYES!"*

Not listening. No, both hands on the gamma's knife wrist, scrambling over the Asian kid, who was rolling on the floor, being kicked, clutching his pen, jabbing through paper, still writing.

Cauldwell might not have any legs from mid-thigh down, but he had inches on Reyes across the shoulders, and the Kevlar wouldn't do much against a stab. The gamma tumbled from his wheelchair, pulled Reyes to the floor, rolled atop him. Matte-finished knives don't glint, but Hafidha swore the thing winked wickedly as Cauldwell reared back, kneeling on his stumps, broke Reyes' grip on his wrist. Cauldwell's blood fountained with every breath.

One shot, Hafidha thought, as Todd stepped up beside her.

She took a hard grip on the butt of her pistol, dropped her gaze to the front sight, and pressed off one more as Todd's gun roared on her right.

The gamma jerked. The knife didn't fall.

Follow through. Resight. Press. And again. And again. Todd, too. One more. The gamma's head was a fine red mist now, let's be honest, but once the adrenaline starts pulling the trigger, the trigger gets pulled. She rattled like shaken paper. It was okay.

One more--

Cauldwell teetered and the last pair of rounds--hers, and Duke's--caught him square in the chest and knocked him back. The knife in his convulsing hand chinked off the floor.

Reyes rolled to the side and squirmed out from under, pulling his knees up, grimacing behind a mask of blood. His mouth worked. He wouldn't spit at the crime scene, but Hafidha didn't blame him for wanting to.

She lowered the firearm, but kept it ready, listening to the last hiss of Cauldwell's breath through his ruined face. He looked like the autopsy photos of Bugsy Siegel.

"Blood precautions," Reyes said. "How's the kid?"

Todd picked his footing through the room like a stag moving through the woods in autumn. He knelt beside the Asian boy, who curled tight, face to knees, shoulders shaking with panicked breath. Gently, he prised the pen from the young man's fingers.

No response.

"He's stopped writing." Todd laid the pen back down beside his hand.

*

This time, Todd was waiting when she came in. Not behind the desk, in the alpha-wolf chair, or in the nappy burnt orange lounger... but seated leaning forward on the ratty sofa beside the door. She didn't see him at first; she expected the visitor to have taken the position of power, and she scanned the far side of the room, her forehead wrinkling.

"Melanie," he said. Softly, so she didn't jump.

The antipsychotics were probably making her thick-headed anyway, and then there was the schizophrenic suppression of affect. Her eyes were glazed, the blink-rate too slow. But, eventually, she focused on him.

"Sit down?" he said.

She nodded. He expected her to share the couch, but she plunked down on the floor.

Oh, no. I wonder where I've seen that *before?*

He scooted off the couch and landed crosslegged in front of her, corduroy binding his thighs. "I just came to see how you were doing. I'm--"

"Agent Todd," she said. "I remember you. You're one of the FBI guys."

He nodded.

She said, "My mom brought me newspaper clippings. She said Jim used drugs to make us see things that weren't real?"

Todd looked down at his hands, at the hangnail on his right thumb. "We're not exactly sure how it worked."

"I liked him." She closed her eyes. "He was nice to me. Not like--"

Yeah, kid. Todd wanted to reach out and put a hand on her shoulder, but that would be inappropriate. *Sorry your surrogate father-figure turned out to be a monster, too.* And it wouldn't help her at all for him to tell her it wasn't Cauldwell's fault. *Go ahead and hate him for a while. It makes it easier.* "It wasn't *your* fault," Todd said.

Sometimes, all you can offer is absolution.

She licked cracked lips. Her eyes stayed down. "The doctor says I'm making progress. But I can still feel--"

The heat. The brush of leaves against your face. The way your foot slips in mud inside a waterlogged boot.

"He broke my life," she said. "I want it back. I want it--"

"Hey," Todd said. "Melanie. Look at me."

She lifted her chin.

"It's like a car wreck, okay? It happened. You got hurt. But the war is over, kiddo. You made it through. Everything is going to be okay now."

"Really?"

And Todd took a breath and smiled, and lied like a fox. She'd figure it out eventually, the lie and the reasons for it, after she didn't need so badly to believe it anymore. "Really. It just takes time, is all."

#

Upon due consideration, Chaz concluded that the real reason Reyes usually didn't bring Hafidha into the field was that they missed her too much during the administrative leave, should she happen to shoot somebody. Todd was out too, of course, also due back today. And Worth, Brady, Falkner, and Lau were on a case in Seattle, leaving Chaz and Reyes to mind the ranch, keep the home fires burning, and wrangle clichés.

Fortunately, so far the field team had been getting by on old fashioned street-pounding, but Chaz had been quietly terrified that the call would come in for some heavy database herding and he'd be the only one available to do it. So when somebody said from the doorway, "Hey, Platypus, get out of my chair," he almost crowed with joy.

Instead, he blanked and locked the screens--reflexively: Falkner was a bit of a martinet about it and Hafs was worse--rose awkwardly and said, "Hey! It's Eliot Ness! There's still six doughnuts in the kitchen."

She tipped her head and smiled. "You wrote it on your calendar."

He tapped his forehead. And went to fetch her food.

The doughnuts delivered, Chaz leaned a hip against the desk a few feet from where Hafidha sat and watched her eat the first two. "How did it go with Dad?"

She shrugged, and washed down jelly doughnut with a swallow of milk. "I think *Il Dottore* would like to put a tracking collar on me, and maybe a microchip in my butt so they know where to ship me home to if I stray. But since I've spent the last three weeks jumping through every hoop he can devise, my veto held. Did we figure out the mechanism in the Omaha case?"

"It was catharsis," he said, when her mouth was full of doughnut again. "They thought he was teaching them to contact spirits. But he was just channeling his own trauma through them, over and over again. Slamming neurons to induce hallucinations. Retraining their brains to operate like the minds of schizophrenics. And one by one, they were going mad."

"We say 'experiencing a psychotic break,'" Hafidha said, swilling coffee.

Chaz took a deep breath. "How much of it do you think was the anomaly, and how much was Vietnam, and how much was just James Cauldwell?"

She stared, and he backtracked hastily.

"You did the right thing," he said. "I didn't mean to suggest otherwise. You doing better on the food front?"

She lifted her chin, still staring. He saw it from his peripheral vision, because he wasn't looking at her directly. "Starting to gain some weight back," she said. "There were a couple of bad days there. I honestly couldn't eat enough to keep up. You're worried. About you."

"Well, duh." He looked at his wristwatch. "Breakthrough. It's scary."

She shrugged. She was still staring, so he figured he might as well stop faking inattention. When his eyes slid over to her, she said, "Well, except for

the part where I did it without even noticing. Seriously. It's a great toy, Chaz. I have wireless. *Everywhere.* And hey, look at this!"

She turned to the computers. She wiggled her left hand as if on the mouse. Screens lit up, data scrolled.

Chaz *felt* his pupils dilate. "I am totally sick with envy, you know."

"I know," she said. "I would be too. That's why I'm buying you lunch today."

"What?"

"I just cancelled my broadband, smarty-boy. I've got thirty-nine bucks a month I've got to blow on something, and my closet's already full of shoes."

It was hard to stay jealous around somebody so damned pleased to be themselves. "You really like this, don't you?"

"I really, really do." There was an edge on it, though. A kind of melancholy. Chaz was a good enough profiler to catch it when it hit him between the eyes.

And he was a good enough profiler to defuse it, too. "Man, why do you get all the good stuff? If I got a manifestation, it would probably be miraculous projectile vomiting." His voice wobbled. He hadn't realized it wasn't a phrase you could say with a straight face.

"Bah. You have your uses."

He grinned, but she wasn't over being half-sad. Her fingers moved, a little twitch, as if she were keyboarding. They never left the arms of her chair. Screen savers blossomed everywhere. She turned and gave him a look. "I liked the field, too," she said. "I miss the heart-racing thing, sometimes."

"Even when you wind up shooting somebody?"

Okay, way to go, cowboy. Smooooth. He waited for her face to crumple, for the shakes in her hands. It's what he would have done.

But she just looked down at them and shook her head. "He was trying to put a knife in Reyes, honey. I feel okay about it, actually." And then she took a big deep breath and said, "Hey Chaz?"

"Hafs?"

"If... if anything bad happens?" She held up her pinky, crooked. "Promise me you won't let me do anything like that to anybody, man? You'll do what you have to? Pinky-swear?"

"You won't." He hooked his own pinky around hers, feeling the dry warmth of her skin. He hoped she wouldn't notice that he hadn't promised. "Pinky-swear."

She looked at him for a long time before she nodded and pulled back her hand.

"People," Chaz said, shaking his head. "You think you know a girl, and she turns out to be a gunslinger." He was angling for a laugh, and didn't get it. Dammit, this had not been supposed to be an awkward conversation, all sharp angles and obliques. He swallowed. And then he stepped away from her chair. "Like this thing with the will, and my mom."

Oh, there it was. The track he'd needed to get around to the thing he had to say, and didn't know how: *You're not what I thought you were, Hafidha. But it doesn't matter, because you are still and will always be my friend.*

Still, and always. The only person in the world who got it, or ever would.

He could get there from here. He could tell, because she made a circle with one hand and asked, "You going to go to Texas?"

"Eventually." He shrugged. "In my copious spare time. But yeah, I think I can face it. It's just a house she used to live in, right?"

"It's just the place where she grew up," Hafidha said. She picked up a third doughnut and took a bite, and handed him the fourth. "It worries you."

"I thought I knew who she was," he said. "I remember her really well. Nobody in the foster system believed that, you know. They thought I was making things up. And I know--" He shook his head. It took a deep breath to get through the pain trying to lock his throat. "--I know she didn't leave me on purpose. But that's the way addiction works. The addiction is more important than anything else, in the end. It's like cancer. It eats everything it touches. Oh, *damn.* "

The tension in the muscles of his face made his head ache, all the way around to the back. Hafidha reached out, softly, and touched his hand. "Can't do that with the wireless in my head," she said, to make him smile.

He blinked rapidly, and got the stinging in his eyes under control.

She pulled her hand back. "While we're on the topic, c'mere. Wanna show you something. I got nosy while I was out. One more fucking Minnesota Multimoronic Personality Inventory and I was going to bite somebody. Probably *El Jefe.* "

Chaz turned to see her screens. The screensaver zipped off and a page of text popped up front and center. It looked like a scanned magazine article, dated early 1978. "'One Thousand In Guyana.' Solomon Todd. Oh, my."

"You knew he was a reporter before he was FBI."

"I didn't know he was a reporter *in fucking Jonestown.*"

"Well," she said. "I guess he got out before."

"Before," Chaz echoed. She meant: *before nine hundred and nine people died in a mass-murder/suicide of Biblical proportions.* Chaz shook his head. "You'd never guess it to look at him, would you?"

Hafidha looked at Chaz, and shook her head, smiling. "No. You'd never guess." And then she said, very carefully, "You think you understand people, you know? You know what they eat, you know how they take their coffee." She gestured with the pastry in her hand. "You know what kind of doughnuts they like. So you think you know *them*. You think you know *yourself*."

"Yeah," Chaz said, understanding. "You think so. And then you don't. You really don't."

He touched her shoulder. She laid her cheek against his knuckles briefly.

He said, "But that's okay."

*

He who makes a beast out of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.

-- Samuel Johnson

Tapeworm

Omaha, NE, June, 2007

Todd's voice ran measured and clear in Hafidha's phone headset, like a post-grad lecturer. Reyes was probably having flashbacks in the driver's seat. "Anecdotally, schizophrenics may abruptly drop a lot of weight, in part because they may not eat, and in part because--"

"An amped-up brain burns through glucose like whoa," Hafidha said, taking a bite out of a Ring Ding. *Hafidha 'the human tapeworm' Gates. If I ever get tired of cop work, I can go into hot dog eating contests.* "Maybe he's trying to turn them into jammers?"

"Jammers?"

"Anomaloids," she explained, reluctantly, sliding the ridiculous word out long and droopy. "Gammas."

She had said it flippantly, but the implications settled in slowly, drawn on Todd's thoughtful silence. "Think you could?" he said, when she'd had plenty of time to frown at the other half of the Ring Ding and set it back on the wrapper with its doomed twin.

"*Make* a gamma? It makes me queasy to think about it. How much does a gamma brain scan look like a schizophrenic one?"

Reyes grunted noncommittally, which Hafidha took to mean, *Some*.

Mercifully, Todd changed the subject, because Todd did things like that. Unless he was conducting an interview, in which case, he only changed the subject to come back at you from a different angle. "What have you got on the school records and police blotter, Hafs?"

That finger rolled the mouse wheel again. "Nothing conclusive. Nothing coming up colors. If there's a sixth vic, I'm not finding them, and it's not like college students, even freshmen, have daily homework assignments we could track. I placed a couple of calls and emails to professors, though, and it does seem that each victim's class attendance dropped off for a week or so before he or she cracked. That's--what was your word, Duke?--anecdotal, though."

"Right," Reyes said. "So what do college freshmen do?"

"Try to find a community," Todd answered, promptly. "Look for mentors and friends. Find places to hang out."

"Join clubs," Hafidha said, and felt the click. "Don't even say it, I'm on it already. The thing is, if they'd each just joined some club before *It* happened to them, they might not be in the computerized membership lists."

"Legwork, Hafs? My heart bleeds."

"Hah," she answered. "Look, I'm going to call Lau and tell her to ask about social groups and extracurricular activities, okay?"

"Okay," Todd said. "I think we're here, anyway."

"Hafidha!" Reyes' voice stopped her, finger hovering over the disconnect.

"Last time I checked."

"Send the brain scans to Doctor Frost."

Oh yes. That would be the logical next step, and if Hafidha didn't tend to class Madeline Frost with the Boogeyman and the Grinch, she would have thought of it herself. She said, "*In šaʾ Allāh, sahib*," and hit the disconnect.

And then, after a moment to compose herself, during which she put the wounded Ring Ding out of its misery, she bit her thumb in the general direction of Johns Hopkins and hit 666 on her speed dial.

The Living Word

Baltimore, MD, April, 2007

The woman standing by the crosswalk shoved a flyer at Hafidha. "Have you found Jesus?"

Hafidha stopped. "No." She held eye contact until the woman--white, middle-aged, suburban upper middle class, not the usual profile for a streetcorner proselytizer--shifted nervously. Then she smiled and took the flyer. "But if I see him, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

She was two blocks away before she looked at the flyer in her hand. Kinko's made professional-looking flyers possible for the rankest of amateurs, but whoever had made this one had a good eye for graphic design. THE TRUTH IS REVEALED UNTO US, it said. THE LIVING **WORD** OF GOD **WILL** SPEAK TO YOU. 7 P.M., EVERY WEDNESDAY. And then an address that was almost certainly a store-front.

Something about it tickled at her bullshit detector. But--photocopy, no love there. She muttered under her breath: "Stupid-ass old-skool ink-on-paper information delivery system." No seeing pretty colors here, even if this chatty Living Word of God was made of jam.

But then, the world was crammed full of non-anomaloid kooks. Odds were against it. And people didn't just hand you the start of a case file on a street corner. So, no.

It still tickled.

She'd bet they had an online presence. Hell, her *dry cleaner* had an online presence. Take maybe five minutes to find 'em. Nobody would miss five minutes out of her otherwise-productive day...

Significant

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. June 2007

Brady returned from his second coffee pilgrimage of the morning and saw Daphne Worth putting a framed 5x7 prominently on her desk, with the air of one who wanted it to be commented on. "Pretty lady," Brady said. "Who is she?"

Worth grinned at him, and he knew bravado when he saw it. "Guess."

Chaz spun his chair around. She obligingly angled the picture so he could see it. "Sister."

"Chaz honey," said Hafidha, leaning hip-shot against the divider, "you are not even trying. Daph and that lady are sisters about the same way I'm the long lost twin of Josephine Baker."

"But Hafidha," Brady said, "you *are* the long lost twin of Josephine Baker."

"You gonna pay good money to see my fan dance?"

"Try again," Worth said, eyes bright. She was almost bouncing in her chair, nervous but brazening it out. Brady'd given her an out, a distraction, and she'd refused it. Interesting.

"College roommate? Childhood friend?"

Hafidha rolled her eyes and said, drawling the syllables out for maximum effect, "Girlfriend? As in, *significant other?*"

"Bing bing bing bing bing!" Worth said. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner!"

She was scared, but she wasn't backing down, as if she could make this go well through sheer force of personality, committed to telling the truth with her whole heart. Worth sought the truth like a grail knight. Brady supposed he shouldn't be surprised she would wear its favor on her sleeve in personal matters as much as in her work. He felt a little hollow. *You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din.*

Hafidha must either have known already or have guessed almost at once. She didn't miss a beat. "What do I win?"

"What do you want?"

"As the long lost twin of Josephine Baker, I want a smooch."

"Is this sexual harrassment in the workplace?"

"Only if you feel harrassed, Peaches," Hafidha said. Worth laughed a delighted overbubbling laugh, got up, and gave Hafidha a smacking kiss on the cheek.

"No PDA in the bullpen," Reyes said from his office door.

Chaz was still processing. "You're a lesbian?"

"Bisexual." Worth's grin widened and she leaned over Chaz, curling her fingers into claws. "No one is safe from my predatory ways!"

Chaz, after a moment's puzzled and genuine alarm, shrank back in his chair, crying, "Aunty Em! Aunty Em!" in a remarkably good Judy Garland impression.

Hafidha said, "Your Aunty Em won't save you now, boy. Ain't you heard? We aren't in Kansas anymore."

Reyes made an I-give-up face and went back into his office, closing the door behind him.

And Brady, finally, began to laugh.

Standoff

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., March, 2004

Hafidha could feel Stephen Reyes too damned close behind her chair. She pretended she didn't and started writing another set of search filters.

"Can I see you in my office, please?" His voice was neutral, which, she already knew, meant absolutely nothing.

Hafidha turned in her chair and draped her arm over the back. "You *can*."

It took him half a beat to figure it out, and his mouth lifted and compressed at one corner. *Smart boy, Il Dottore.* She almost wished she could have held off, just long enough to get more of a taste of this. No, better to do it now, before it hurt.

"Would you come with me to my office, please?"

"Sure thing." She hit three keys to throw up the password-locked screensavers on her monitors and spun her chair. He'd already started out the door.

Hafidha followed Reyes through the bullpen. Peretti looked up at Reyes before his eyes shifted to her. He blinked, opened his mouth, seemed to reconsider, and turned back to the file in front of him.

Solomon Todd came out of the kitchenette and spotted her. His eyebrows lifted a little, just enough to line his forehead. He stuck out his lower lip in thought. Then he nodded to her and went on to his desk.

It was stupid. It wasn't as if it mattered. But that nod gave her a little warm, soft ball in her chest. *It's been nice working with you, Agent Todd. A week I'll treasure always.*

In his office, Reyes waved at the visitor's chair. She sat in it, and he closed the door. As she'd expected, he settled behind his desk, hands side by side and flat on the surface, before he spoke. "This building is full of people who voted for Ronald Reagan."

Hafidha widened her eyes and made an *O* of her mouth. "Oh, no. Sir, just tell me what I can do to help."

He looked down and pressed his lips together. Point to her. "Unfamiliar things make them nervous. Things that don't fit their world picture make them very nervous."

He stopped and stared at her. So Hafidha stared back and nodded.

"Shadow Unit is so far out of their comfort zone that 'nervous' applies about as well as 'unfortunate' does to the Waco seige."

She didn't laugh, but she knew he could see her throat compress around it. Point to him.

"I'm trying to keep us as much off the radar as I can, under the circumstances," he continued. "The more successful I am at that, the better it is for the unit. We need a certain amount of hands-off attitude to get results."

"Yes, sir," Hafidha said, since it seemed like a good time to say something.

He clasped his hands. "You're making that harder."

Battle is joined. She put a layer of sad-and-earnest on her face. "I know. I'm the wrong color. I'm a girl. But I thought, with all those federal anti-discrimination laws--"

"You know what I'm talking about."

She smiled. She couldn't help it.

He added, "That is not how FBI agents dress."

Hafidha did a quick inventory. Cowboy boots gleaming. Distressed-velvet skirt a little wrinkled, no helping that, but draping nicely. Vintage ladies' suit jacket, blue raw silk with covered buttons and asymmetrical lapels--best thing in her closet. No need to check her hair. It was cornrowed to top-of-ear height, then sprang free in natural curls to her shoulders. She'd done the purple streaks on Saturday. All her earrings matched.

Yep, perfectly groomed, professional, and a credit to herself. Last week she'd only been two out of three. She'd needed a week to know if this fight was worth having. "Face it, not many of them *could* dress like this."

He raked his fingers through his own dense, barbered hair. "I'm asking for your help."

Oh, hell. That took the fun right out of it. "I get that. Look, Secret Service? I was navy-blue suit and hair scraped back and nice black flat-heeled shoes every damned day. I did it because I loved the job, and that's what the job demanded. That I leave *me* at home.

"And look what that got me."

The line of his jaw changed, hardened. Teeth clenched, probably. *Join the club, Doctor Reyes.*

"Now you want me here, working for you. And you promise that nobody will give me shit for what I am now. Well, this is what I am now. If you want the Real Me, you have to take the whole package."

"Or?"

"Or I find someone in the private sector to love and cherish the multifaceted wonder that is me." Maybe she could find a place in the private sector, maybe. One that wouldn't require a disguise harder to live behind than a navy-blue suit.

She saw something happen behind his eyes and added, "Or is this The Village, and I'm a number after all?"

"You mean, do I want you where I can keep an eye on you? Of course I do. But if I meant to lock you up, you would be already."

"So. What do we do?"

Reyes stared at her, his mouth working a little. "I guess," he said slowly, "I run interference for you, while you work miracles for me."

It took a second for it to register. "No dress code?"

"I wouldn't go that far. And neither would you."

She was weak with relief. My God, she'd wanted to stay. She hadn't known it until this moment. "Yes, sir. Very good, *Capitaine*."

"I think I prefer 'sir'."

"Of course you do." She smiled, stood, and crossed the room to the door. The cowboy boots made an authoritative noise even on the carpet. She loved that. "Oh, and I should warn you. I'm getting a tattoo."

Reyes laced his fingers together under his chin. "I already have one."

Her smile stretched beyond her control. She bowed from the waist and let herself out into the bullpen and her future.

shadow unit

1.03 "Dexterity" - by Sarah Monette

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Chicago, IL, January 2007

Hell came for Dyson Cieslewicz on a sunny Tuesday morning in mid-January.

Eddie shut the door of Dice's room behind him and said, perfectly pleasantly, "I'm sorry, but this left-handed crap has got to stop."

Dice was only half awake; he hadn't gotten to bed until nearly four, still reeking of cigarette smoke and beer and other people's sweat. "Eddie? Man, haven't you heard of knocking?"

"I mean it, Dice." Eddie was already standing beside the bed. He was built like a bulldozer, but he could move fast when he wanted. "This left-handed *crap* has *got* to *stop*."

Dice sat up, left hand groping automatically for his glasses. "What the f--"

Eddie caught Dice's left hand, pinning the wrist with his own left hand, his right hand folded around Dice's fingers. "I'm sorry about this, I really am, but you just don't fucking *learn*."

And with a single sharp motion, Eddie Cieslewicz broke all four fingers on his older brother's left hand.

Dice howled, folding into a semi-fetal ball, except for his left arm, which remained immobilized by Eddie's iron grip. Eddie watched Dice's agony for a moment, blank faced and unmoved, then said again, softly, "It has to stop," and broke Dice's thumb as well.

*

June 2007

On the morning of June twenty-eighth, Daniel Brady woke from the same old nightmare. "Motherfucker," he said softly to the ceiling, then got out of bed and got moving.

The world was still tainted with blood and gunpowder when he got to work, and he was hoping--more desperately than he would ever have admitted--for a case, something, *anything* to force his mind away from the memory of that spreading pool of blood.

Coffee helped, transmuting the bitterness in his mouth, as did the spectacle of Chaz Villette all but unhinging his jaw to eat a raspberry danish.

"You look rough, Danny," Todd said as he stirred creamer into his coffee. "Want me to beat Villette off long enough for you to grab a cruller?"

"Hey!" Chaz protested without a shadow of resentment or concern, and Brady felt the nightmare crack and fall away.

"That's okay, but thanks. Wouldn't want to deprive a growing boy of his sugar and carbs."

"You may think you're funny," Chaz said, licking his fingers, "but you really really aren't. Besides, sugar is a carbohydrate. And carbs are turned into glucose during digestion. So 'sugar and carbs' is a tautology."

"A which?"

Chaz smiled sweetly and insincerely. "You're redundant, Brady."

"I'd make a smart-ass reply, but there'd probably be something in it you'd need to correct," Brady said. "So--how'd you do at the range Saturday?"

"Asshole," Chaz explained, but he was grinning.

"If I may interrupt the kaffeeklatsch," Reyes said dourly from the door, "I could use you all in the briefing room."

Chaz jerked to his feet. Todd snorted. "I still think 'briefing room' is an exaggeration."

"Yeah," Brady said, topping up his cup and turning to follow, "but 'briefing closet' just doesn't have the same ring."

It was true, though, that the entire team couldn't sit down in the briefing room at the same time, and only barely fit at all. Brady's private suspicion

was that this was some sort of complicated psychological stratagem on Reyes's part, like using electric shocks to teach rats to run a maze, although what Reyes was trying to teach them he had no idea and was honestly afraid to speculate. Possibly to abandon the notion of personal space, he thought as he wedged himself between Chaz and Todd at the table.

Todd still smelled faintly of his Vespa and D.C. traffic. Next to him, Hafidha had her hair in cornrows as elaborate as crop circles and glittering silver polish on her fingernails. Reyes and Falkner were standing at the head of the table. Falkner never sat; Reyes sat or stood depending on his mood. Across from Brady, Worth, as bright-eyed and alert as ever, was watching Falkner watching Reyes, and Lau was immaculate but drinking coffee as if her life depended on it.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Reyes said, still dour. "I appreciate these moments taken out of your very busy schedules."

"God," said Chaz, *sotto voce*. "Who peed in *his* coffee?"

Reyes didn't hear him, but he must have sensed the disturbance in the Force--Brady and Todd carefully not laughing--for he glared around the room and said, "Chicago has a serial killer."

"This is news?" muttered someone--Lau or Worth, both of whom were carefully blank faced by the time Reyes wheeled around to pin the glare on them.

"Chicago," Reyes said, "has a serial killer who is beating his victims to death with, so far as Dr. Frost can tell me, his bare hands. And he's doing it with a single blow."

"That's not necessarily a manifestation," Chaz objected. "Certain areas of the body, particularly the neck and skull, are surprisingly fragile, and a well-placed blow can--"

Kill a man before he knows you're there, Brady thought, but mercifully Reyes was already answering: "Bits of the third victim's ribcage were embedded in the wall behind her."

"Oh," Chaz said, looking simultaneously embarrassed and nauseated.

"Chicago PD assumed he was using a sledgehammer until two days ago, when they got a witness who saw the host leaving the fourth victim's

apartment building. She saw him from behind and from three stories up, so there's no hope of ID, but she was absolutely, unshakably certain that he wasn't carrying anything. Word got to me, I had the fourth victim sent to Dr. Frost, and she says antemortem contusions of the apparent deathblow are consistent with the imprint of a set of knuckles. Left hand. His skull was crushed."

"The host killed him with a bare-knuckle punch?" Brady said.

Todd whistled. "And he's done it more than once?"

"Four times since February," Reyes said. He knew the same thing they knew. As did Falkner, whose eyebrows were up. Chaz and Lau looked blank, although with Lau that meant her fingers were laced together in front of her rather than anything that was showing on her face. Worth was frowning at the autopsy report.

Brady said, "Punching somebody in the head is a damn fine way to break your hand."

"Not for this guy, apparently," said Todd.

"So Chicago's 'Sledgehammer' is one of ours," Reyes said, investing the nickname with immeasurable distaste. "He's already killed four, and thus far there's been precious little luck in constructing a profile. That's where we're going to start. We need to make the victimology *talk*."

That was Brady's job, and he and Worth sat down with a sad stack of folders: Marcia Lopez, age 25, Kathleen Cherry, age 28, Lydia Harrigan, age 33, and Paul Brunowski, age 27.

"This is nuts," Worth said after half an hour. "Three women and a man. Three whites and a Hispanic. Three people in their twenties and one in her thirties. Three of them had jobs, and Kathleen Cherry had a sugar daddy. Nothing across the board."

"Not much of a sugar daddy," Brady said. "They were living on his disability checks. So there's one commonality: these are all working-class people. Also, they're all practicing Catholics."

"Not in the same parish," Worth objected.

"No, but each victim's effects included--"

"Brunowski had a St. Christopher's medal," Worth said, looking more interested.

"Right. Cherry and Lopez both wore crucifixes, and Lydia Harrigan's rosary was found in her purse."

"So you're saying..."

"They were easily identifiable as Catholics to their murderer."

"But he didn't kill them for that. No graffiti, no desecration of the bodies."

"No," Brady agreed. "It's not a hate crime. At least not in the traditional sense. He sure hated *something* about them, though."

"No evidence of sexual assault."

"But only one man. I think we can assume our guy's straight, but whatever his trigger is, it overrode that."

"You think he's straight because he kills women?"

"I think he's straight because he *notices* women. He was watching Harrigan, Cherry, and Lopez closely enough to see that they were Catholics, plus whatever else it was that set him off." He shrugged. "It could just be the luck of the draw, but I don't think it affects the profile either way. There's no signs he's enjoying himself. He doesn't linger, either before or after."

"Or during," Worth said, wrinkling her nose.

"Or during. He comes with them to their homes--or that motel room in the case of Cherry--but he never gets farther than the first room. He doesn't *want* to see their bedrooms."

"Chicago forensics said he probably killed Kathleen Cherry standing in the doorway." Worth shuffled papers, looking for the report. "There was no sign he even went into the room."

"Getting it over with," Brady murmured. "Going on about his business."

"Doing the work of the Lord," Worth said suddenly and shivered.

"Good one, Daph," Brady said. "That's why he's going after Catholics. He's Catholic himself."

"So...what? They're all wicked sinners?" Worth considered. "Well, I guess Cherry was living in sin--and cheating on her boyfriend to boot. And Brunowski was gay. But there was nothing wrong with Lopez or Harrigan."

There was nothing wrong with Brunowski, Brady almost said, but that wasn't what Worth had meant. Instead, he emended her statement: "Nothing that made it into the files. The map is not the territory."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Worth said, waving it off. "But he's a house-cleaner, is my point."

"He seems to be a mission-oriented serial killer," Brady agreed more cautiously.

"Aw, c'mon, Danny. Give me *one* piece of this darn profile that works like it's supposed to."

"As long as you don't get used to it," Brady said.

They grumbled over the files until Reyes yelled that anyone not ready to go in five minutes was going to get left behind. Brady dumped everything into his briefcase while Worth darted for the bathroom. Chaz, who had been doing something arcane with a street map of Chicago, shoved it into his backpack with one hand, grabbing a handful of peanuts with the other, and muttered under his breath, "*Yes,* Dad, *coming,* Dad."

"I heard that, Villette," Reyes said, stone-faced as ever, and Brady thought, for what was probably the five hundredth time, that you would have to be seriously fucking nuts to play poker with Stephen Reyes.

*

On the plane, Stephen Reyes watched as Chaz Villette spread a street map of Chicago on the fold-out table, drawing the rest of the team from their seats on the jet like a piece of tinfoil attracting jackdaws.

"You want I should get you a dowsing rod?" Todd asked.

"You got one on you?" Chaz said, not looking up.

Todd made a show of checking his pockets, rummaging until Chaz was drawn into looking at him, then grinned, his face creasing like crumpled paper. "Must've left it in my other pants."

Chaz tried to look irritated and failed. Brady said, "Geographic profile?"

It was obvious Chaz was pleased to be asked, pleased to be included in the team's camaraderie instead of being the outcast at whose expense it was established. Reyes remembered how Chaz had been, fresh out of Quantico: long gangling limbs held close and tight, giving him a weirdly prim affect; his face wiped clean of all its natural expressiveness; his voice flat, soft, and every word precensored lest it sound too "brainy." Only those eyes, dark and darker, watching everything and everyone, waiting for the next trap to trigger.

Reyes knew Chaz had been queer-bashed once, not because his fellow trainees thought he was gay, but because he was too different, and that was the only label they had to put on him. Chaz hadn't reported it, because he'd also known it wasn't about his sexual orientation.

Shadow Unit is better for him. It's turned out all right, Reyes thought, and did not ask himself whom he was trying to convince.

"Well," Chaz said, "it occurred to me that although none of the victims lived in the same neighborhood, they all lived relatively close to each other." He jabbed at colored dots he'd made on the map, purple for Lopez, red for Cherry, blue for Brunowski, and green for Harrigan. "*And* the motel where Kathleen Cherry died isn't far away either." Another dot, this one orange. "So I thought, wherever he's finding them, it's probably somewhere in here." He'd drawn circles around each dot, each with a carefully measured radius, and the area where most of them overlapped had been colored yellow.

All of which, Reyes knew, would be sharp and clear in Chaz's mind. No map necessary. In fact, the map was probably only slowing him down; it would have taken him less time to work it out and simply tell them where to look. This performance--map, radii, colors--wasn't for Chaz. He was doing it for them: showing them how his mind worked, demythologizing the monster. Making himself understood and therefore safe.

Chaz felt Reyes's stare and looked up. Their eyes met; then Chaz gave him a *Yeah, but you gotta grow where you're planted* shrug and looked back at the map of Chicago that was also, in this small, strange way, a map of Charles Villette.

"Y'know," Lau said, "math classes might be a lot more popular if teachers told students they could catch serial killers with Venn diagrams."

Brady said, "Would've worked for me."

"Oh, hell yes," said Worth. "So what's in your yellow area?"

"I've got Hafidha working on that," Chaz said. "She promised to have a list by the time we land."

In fact, they got Hafidha's list while they were still in the air. "Check your mail, G-men and women," she said when Falkner switched her to speaker phone. "Relevant parts of the city directory are now yours."

Chaz thumbed up the text message. "Thomas Jefferson Middle School."

"None of the victims had kids," Brady answered, as easily as a tennis pro returning a lob.

"Can we do anything with that?" Worth said.

"Three of the four were unmarried, and Lydia Harrigan had been separated from her husband for five years. No go."

"Correlation is not causation, children," Todd said, as Todd had a habit of saying.

"Then I guess we can cross the elementary school and the five daycares off the list, too," Chaz said.

"Things I could've known yesterday," Hafidha grumbled.

"Don't quote Adam Sandler, Hafs," Lau said. "It gives me hives."

"Sorry, sweetie," Hafidha said.

Reyes admired her for sounding so resolutely like herself, as if nothing had happened in Omaha. He admired the rest for sounding as if they weren't walking on knives and eggshells in response.

"There are seven churches of various denominations, plus something that calls itself the Good News Kingdom Hall," Hafidha continued, "but since all the victims are Catholic..."

Reyes lifted his head. "Are any of those churches a victim's parish church?"

"Paul Brunowski went to St. Francis," Hafidha said.

"Which is here," Chaz said, drawing a blue star on his map.

"But Lopez attended Our Lady of the Holy Faith, which is twenty minutes away by bus. Services in Spanish. Kathleen Cherry was pretty lapsed, but when she attended anywhere, it was St. Agnes, which was also Lydia Harrigan's church. It's in Chaz's DMZ, too."

"Here," said Chaz, drawing a green star.

How can you be "pretty lapsed"? Reyes thought, but did not say. *Is it like being a "little pregnant"?* He'd found that "lapsed" was a binary; once he cut his ties with the Catholic Church, he'd never had so much as a flicker of an impulse to return.

"That's not terribly helpful." Chaz looked discontentedly at his map. "Hafidha? What about public parks? Movie theaters? Um, supermarkets?"

"What about bars?" Brady said.

"Bars?" Chaz and Worth both looked puzzled.

"Bars," Reyes agreed. "Working class victims, probably a working class host. The neighborhood bar is the place they're most likely to have in common."

"Working class people drink more?" said Lau, in the same tone she usually said "inscrutable Oriental."

"Nope," Brady replied. "Working class people are more likely to live in circumstances where it's hard to socialize at home. So you go where everybody knows your name."

Reyes nodded. He was surprised when Brady saw it and lifted his chin, leaned back in his seat. Daniel Brady shouldn't need gold stars from him or anyone else. *Of course he does. He's human. So are the rest of them.*

"There are two bars in the Yellow Zone," Hafidha said. "The Crystal Cave and Stosh's Bar."

"All right," Reyes said. "That gives us a division of labor when we hit the ground."

"Running, of course," Todd said.

"Of course," Reyes said and didn't let himself smile. Quite. "Villette, Brady, Lau, you take the Crystal Cave. Falkner, Worth, Todd, you take Stosh's Bar.

I'll check in with the detective of record and see what we've got."

Falkner gave him a look, the severely skeptical one he suspected she used on her daughters--though, one hoped, not on her husband. But if she knew, or guessed, that he was avoiding the memories that working class Chicago bars would dredge up, she was kind enough not to say anything about it.

Act II

Dice had kept his job at the Crystal Cave mostly because Greg the manager didn't want to piss Eddie off. And because Dice had proved the hard way that, if he had to, he could cope with a beer keg. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but he wasn't going to say that to either Greg or Eddie. Because things could be worse.

Things could be *so* much worse. A little tango or two with a beer keg wasn't even worth the mention.

Dice was lucky, and he knew it. He fucking *lived* it, and he'd gotten the rabbit tattoo to be sure he remembered it. Left forearm, where he'd see it every time he forgot and reached for something with his left hand. His left hand that didn't work all that well anymore.

Eddie'd gotten his friend Bruno who was a paramedic to splint it, and Bruno would probably lie down in front of a semi if Eddie asked him to and thought Dice was a pussy anyway, so he hadn't asked questions even though he must have known it wasn't an accident.

Dice had gotten one of those little stress balls and faked physical therapy as best he could, so at least his thumb still worked, although as far as gripping anything, the hand was pretty much a loss. But it was okay, because he wasn't supposed to be using his left hand. *You understand me, Dyson? Yes, Dad, I understand.*

No, Eddie, I swear, I ain't been using it. I can't, see?

Dice shook himself. He'd learned since January not to let that train of thought get started. That was the other reason he'd gotten the rabbit tattoo, because the rabbit was secretly that rabbit from *Watership Down*, the one who couldn't keep a secret and almost got everybody killed. A reminder, in other words, to keep his trap shut.

And not to use his left hand.

He'd gotten in the habit of tucking his left arm against his stomach, almost hiding his left hand under his right elbow. And wouldn't you know it, the FBI guy, the one who was sitting out here keeping an eye on everybody while the other FBI guys--one of whom was actually an FBI *lady*--questioned them, one at a time, back in Greg's office, this tall skinny FBI guy noticed and said, "Hurt your hand?"

Dice kept moving through the automatic flinch and freeze reaction, said, "Nah, old injury. You want more water?"

"Thanks," the FBI guy said, and wow, he had a nice smile when he pulled it out. "We flew in from D.C. today and I feel like a desiccated frog. Do you--I mean, if it isn't any trouble, do you have any lemon slices?"

"Sure." He went and got a lemon out of the fridge in the back, said a quick Hail Mary, and cut it, holding it with the thumb and two fingers of his left hand that worked, using the knife with the right. The slices came out okay--a little uneven, but not so's you'd notice--and he stuck all but one in the Rubbermaid container marked LEMON and went back out to give the FBI guy his water.

And the FBI guy, damn him, sat there and hoovered up the peanuts and noticed all the times when Dice would've used his left hand and couldn't. "Must've been a pretty nasty injury," he said. "How long ago did you say it was?"

"January," Chrissy said, coming up on the FBI guy's other side, and leaning on him so her cleavage would be the only thing he could see. "Dice broke his hand in January and he's been a real bitch ever since."

The FBI guy tried to lean away from Chrissy without it looking like that was what he was doing. "January, huh? That's not that old."

"Chrissy, for fuck's sake, haul your tits in and let the man breathe."

"Ooh, touchy," Chrissy said and made a kissy-face at him before flouncing over to bother Kevin and the bouncer whose name Dice could never remember.

"Sorry," Dice said to the FBI guy, who looked like he could use a hole to crawl into and die. "She wouldn't come on that strong if she really thought

you'd be interested."

"I, um. I guess that's reassuring." He drank his water and ate more peanuts and didn't say another word before the other FBI guy, the tank, came out and pointed at Dice. "You. You're next."

*

The bartender's name was Dyson Cieslewicz, which gave both Brady and Lau, as veterans of America's public school playgrounds, a momentary empathetic flinch. He was 5'10" and skinny, and he carried his shoulders in a defensive hunch that looked beyond habitual and well into constant. Acne scarred face, the Slavic cheekbones that went with the word *apparatchik*, and also *lumpenproletariat*, long dark hair, and glasses in those black frames that were either geeky or retro. Brady had lost track of which.

Brady had mostly been trained out of automatically associating "geek" with "loser," but Dyson Cieslewicz was not a good advertisement for the side. He had two rings in his left eyebrow, ten--Brady counted--in his left ear, five in his right, including something Brady believed was called an "industrial." There was an elaborate tattoo on his right arm, a dragon in blue and green and red winding around and around his forearm and glaring balefully out from his right biceps.

He sat down in the chair Brady indicated--cracked orange vinyl and cigarette burns--crossed his arms over his stomach, and peered at the two of them over the tops of his glasses.

Brady glanced at Lau and got the barest inclination of a nod in return before Lau went to work. *More* intimidation was not what this kid needed. "Mr. Cieslewicz," Lau said, in her dealing-with-the-distraught-public voice, "we need you to look at these pictures and tell us if you recognize any of the subjects."

Lau had the best dealing-with-the-distraught-public voice Brady had ever heard.

Cieslewicz scooted himself forward to the edge of the chair and looked at the pictures laid out on the desk. Brady watched him; unlike the manager and the first waitress they'd interviewed, Cieslewicz was actually *looking*, and after a frowning moment of contemplation, he said, "Yeah."

"Which one?" Lau said, still in that lovely calm voice, even though she, like Brady, had to have the little voice in her head screaming *Jackpot!*

Cieslewicz looked up. "All of them."

Brady and Lau did a momentary verbal Keystone Kops impression. Brady backed off; he'd given Lau lead, after all. Lau said, "You know all four of them?"

Cieslewicz shrugged, an ugly awkwardness. Brady thought, *He hates his body.* "Not *know*. But" --unclenching enough to jab a forefinger at the pictures as he spoke-- "she drinks Molson, she drinks Stoli, she drinks Mai Tais, and Paul used to give me sh--give me a hard time, until Eddie threatened to rearrange his face."

"Eddie?" Cieslewicz was femme in an Ugly Stepsister sort of way, but he wasn't pinging Brady's gaydar particularly.

A blush, painfully obvious as it made the pocked scars on his face stand out, and his right arm curled back around his body. "My brother. He's a bouncer."

"Is he here today?"

"'S'is day off. It's the other guy today."

"You recognized all four of them," Lau said. "Did they know each other?"

Cieslewicz jerked his shoulders in a shrug. "How should I know? They don't hang out together, but Paul mostly comes to play pool, and a lady who drinks Molsons and a lady who drinks Mai Tais are not ladies who have a lot in common, if you follow me. The Stoli lady, she comes in once a month, Fridays, like clockwork, has her shot of Stoli and then mostly she amscrays. I figure she comes straight from confession."

"She's Catholic?" Brady said, reminding himself not to quiver like a hunting dog on point.

Cieslewicz grinned, looking briefly as young as his driver's license said he was. "I was an altar boy, believe it or not. I know the stigmata. The Stoli lady is definitely Catholic."

"And the others?"

"Paul grew up going to St. Francis same as me, though I wouldn't take bets on how long it's been since his last confession. I got no idea about the other two. In this neighborhood, it's even odds."

"Are you a practicing Catholic, Mr. Cieslewicz?"

"I go to Mass. I light candles for my father. And what has that got to do with *anything?*"

"Nothing," Lau said mildly, but that wasn't a nothing and Brady didn't need Lau's sidelong flick of a glance to alert him. What she was setting up, though, remained unsprung. Chaz came in, crossed the office in three gangling steps and leaned over to murmur something in Lau's ear. Lau's poker face didn't flicker; she said, "Mr. Cieslewicz, may we see your left hand?"

The bartender hunched in even further.

"Mr. Cieslewicz?"

"It's nothing to do with you," Cieslewicz muttered, his head lowering until nothing of him was visible except the fall of his hair.

"These four people have been murdered, Mr. Cieslewicz," Chaz said.

It was brutally obvious that Dyson Cieslewicz hadn't known. A motivated perp, anomalous or otherwise, could fake a lot of things, but nobody could have faked the way he went pale in blotches, the way he looked wildly back at the pictures, as if he could make them be of people he didn't know, the way he released that tight protective curl of his right arm to cross himself.

Chaz was frowning, but he said, "Your hand?"

Cieslewicz extended it automatically. There was a tattoo of a rabbit on the inside of his wrist, delicate black lines and mad red eyes. The hand was obviously crippled, the joints swollen, skin mottled, ring and pinkie fingers jutting stiffly while index, middle, and thumb were curled protectively. Brady remembered the autopsy report and raised his eyebrows at Chaz. *This guy?*

"Mr. Cieslewicz," said Chaz, raising his eyebrows at Brady over the bartender's bowed head, "how did you hurt your hand?"

"Accident," Cieslewicz mumbled. "In January, like Chrissy said."

"Mr. Cieslewicz," said Lau, "where were you on Tuesday night?"

"Tuesday? I was here, same as..." His head came up, and he stared from Lau to Brady, and then twisted to look up at Chaz. "You think *I* killed them? Because of..."

"Paul Brunowski's skull was crushed by a left-handed blow," Chaz said.

"You people are fucking nuts," said Dyson Cieslewicz. "I can't even *make* a fist no more, much less hit anybody with it." He held his hand up, and they watched as his fingers tensed. The ring and pinkie fingers trembled, but did not bend.

"And how did you hurt your hand?" Chaz said, implacable as the hounds of Hell.

"Accident," Cieslewicz said. "Like I told you." He jerked his hand back into its sheltered position against his side.

Lau's cellphone played "Ride of the Valkyries." "Falkner," she mouthed at Brady and whisked herself out the door.

"Let's work on your alibi," Brady said. "12:30 a.m. Wednesday morning."

"Shift finished at midnight. I went home."

"Is there anyone who can corroborate that?" Chaz asked.

"Do which?"

"Did anyone see you?" Brady translated.

"Eddie went out someplace. Prob'ly with Bruno." That sounded like old bitterness. "Dunno if Mrs. Eckstein on the ground floor was awake. She might've been. But this is *nuts.* I didn't kill anybody, and most especially not left-handed. You can *see* that." He looked from Chaz to Brady, frustrated and frightened. "Can't you?"

Brady raised an eyebrow at Chaz, who looked dissatisfied.

"What about May twelfth?" Brady said.

"Christ in a bucket!" Brady and Chaz just waited. "Okay, okay. May twelfth. What day was that?"

"Saturday," Chaz said.

"Oh, then that's easy. I was here. Six to two, only usually it's more like three. And I got people to *corroborate* it." He drawled *corroborate* out in angry mockery. "People out to here. You can start with Greg." He glared at them defiantly.

Chaz muttered something like, "But there must be..."

Then Lau came in and said, "Sorry, boys, time to pack up the rodeo. Mr. Cieslewicz, thank you very much for your cooperation. Will you be here if we need to speak to you later?"

"'Til midnight," Cieslewicz said. "And you got my address anyway." He looked doubtfully at Chaz and Brady; Brady gave him the nod, and he left, moving like an alley cat that's been in too many fights and been kicked too many times.

Brady stood up, cracked his spine, and followed Lau and Chaz out through the bar into the street, where Lau turned and said, "Chicago PD has another one. Fresh."

Brady whistled soundlessly. "Fresh enough...?"

"Yeah. Nobody who's here could have done it."

"But if all four of them were regulars..." Chaz said, frowning.

Brady remembered something the bartender had said. "The brother!"

"What?" said Chaz.

"The bartender's brother. It's his day off."

"Falkner wants us at the crime scene," Lau said, starting briskly for the Suburban. "I'll call Hafidha as we go. The brother's name is Eddie, right?"

"Yeah. Probably Edward, but it could be Edmund."

"Or Edwin," Chaz said. "Or Edsel. Or Edison."

"Chaz," said Lau. "Stop helping. Hafs? We need everything you know on an Edward--or Edmund--"

"Or Edmonton," Chaz said.

"Cieslewicz," Lau said and stuck her tongue out at Chaz. "C-I-E-S-L-E-W-I-C-Z."

Brady fished out the keys and hit the button to unlock the doors about two seconds before Chaz, who covered ground like one of those huge walking tanks in *Star Wars*, reached for the handle.

"What do we know about Number Five?" Brady asked. "Did Falkner give you anything?"

"Just the address and the name: Stephanie Fisher. She was a single mother."

"Shit," Brady said. "Was the kid--"

"There?" Lau said unhappily. "That's how they found her so fast: he was crying."

"*Shit,*" Brady said.

"I've notified Child and Family Services."

Chaz grimaced, and although he was in the front seat and Lau in the back, she said, "It's the best we can do."

"I know," Chaz said, hunching into himself like a turtle--or, Brady thought and told his profiler's brain to shut up--like Dyson Cieslewicz being asked about his crippled hand.

*

Stephanie Fisher's sprawled puppet-broken body was being examined by a forensics technician when they got to her apartment. As with the other victims, she was lying near her front door. The nearby stroller was skewed at an angle that made Brady's fingers itch to straighten it.

Falkner was holding the baby, looking simultaneously incongruous and perfectly natural, and she said as they came in, "There's a case worker on her way. Thank you, Lau."

The baby was wide-eyed and silent, his skin shadow-dark against Falkner's white shirt. He looked healthy, clean, well cared for, although he'd been crying hard and would probably be crying again soon. Brady didn't blame him.

"Where's Reyes?"

"Still playing *éminence grise* with the Chicago PD. He seems to think Detective Bruckner needs leaning on."

The apartment was clean, very neat, decorated with more care than money, and with a lot of color, colors picked up by the beads in Stephanie Fisher's dreads. There was a guitar hanging on the wall, well out of the reach of a baby's inquisitive fingers. Chaz walked over to inspect it, probably more to get away from the body and the wide-eyed baby than anything else. Then he stiffened.

"What?" said Brady.

"It's a left-handed guitar," Chaz said. "Is she left-handed?"

"She's got a writing callus that says so," the forensics tech said.

"Chaz, it's the *murderer* who's--"

"No, no, no, no, no," Chaz said. "What about the other victims? Do we know? Can we find out?"

"Is there anyone in the WTF who *doesn't* have Hafidha on speed dial?" Lau said, her phone already against her ear. "Hafs? The victims--lefties or righties?" She listened a moment, her eyebrows climbing. "Southpaws, all of them. Thanks."

"Chaz?" said Falkner. "You want to explain?"

"Dyson Cieslewicz's broken hand," Chaz said. "All four fingers *and* the thumb. I can't think of a way that could happen by accident. And I was watching him, before. He's a left-handed man forcing himself to use his right hand. I thought he was the host, that the anomaly was letting him use that hand to kill, even though it's crippled, but I had it backwards."

"But it still doesn't--"

Chaz interrupted Falkner without even noticing. "Dyson Cieslewicz isn't the host. He's the first victim."

"We were wondering about his brother anyway," Brady said.

"Yeah, but that was just an opportunity for today," said Chaz. "This is the rest of it. This is *why.* Dyson Cieslewicz's broken hand is where it starts."

"You think Eddie did it," Lau said. "Because his brother's left-handed?"

"I think we need to talk to Dyson Cieslewicz again," said Brady.

"Lau, take the baby," Falkner said. "I'm coming, too."

Act III

Dice had barely gotten himself talked down, had just taken over from Greg at the bar--already bracing himself for the questions about why they'd been closed for an hour and a half in the middle of the day--when the FBI was back.

This time they had their boss with them, and you didn't have to ask to know that lady was their boss. She looked around the bar like a searchlight in one of those old World War II escape-from-the-Nazis movies, and then the tank and the gawky guy who'd said he felt like a frog were headed straight for the bar.

All Dice's instincts said to run like fuck, but--unlike most of Eddie's loser friends--Dice was smarter than his instincts. He stood pat, and when the tank said, "We need to talk to you again," he just nodded and let them take him back to Greg's office.

"Have a seat, Mr. Cieslewicz," the tank said.

"No thanks," Dice said, "unless you guys are gonna sit down, too."

"Ooh, score one for the opposing team," said the frog and smiled at him, a quick little there-and-gone grin that made Dice feel better despite himself.

"Chaz." The boss, exasperated. She sat down in Greg's chair, pointed the tank and the frog--Chaz--at the love seat along the wall, then gave Dice a smile that was all steel and not really very much smile. "Have a seat, Mr. Cieslewicz."

He sat.

Chaz the frog, leaning forward, said, "Mr. Cieslewicz, did your brother do that to your hand?"

The world went very bright and very sharp, and Dice was halfway to the door before he even knew he was moving. So much for being smarter than his instincts. And then he wasn't going anywhere, because the tank had a very polite, very unshakable grip on his shoulder, which if he shifted about a tenth of an inch was going to be red-hot agony. Dice knew that grip from his dad. He held still.

"Mr. Cieslewicz, I really am sorry about this," Chaz said, and damn him, he sounded like he meant it. Dice turned his head very cautiously to look at the love seat, and the tank let him do it. Chaz was still leaning forward, watching him with wide eyes, and he *did* mean it. "But we have to know. The five people who have been murdered--"

"*Five?*" Dice said and then braced himself, but the tank's grip stayed polite.

"Five. A fifth this afternoon," the boss said. "Stephanie Fisher."

"Stephanie? Oh fuck. Fucking hell. You can let go of me, tank. I ain't going anywhere."

The tank let go like he thought he was going to have to grab on again in a moment, but Dice just went back to the chair and sat down. "She played here. Open mic on Thursdays. She wasn't very good yet, but she was gonna be, y'know? Oh fucking *hell.* What about Noah? Is he okay?"

"Is Noah her baby?" the boss said.

"Yeah. His father's in Joliet on account of some stupid shit he should've known better than, so it's just--it was just Stephanie and Noah, and she was running herself into the *ground*... Jesus." He took his glasses off, pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is Noah okay?"

"He's fine," the boss said. "Child and Family Services will take care of him. Unless you know of someone--a grandmother, an aunt?"

Dice shook his head. "I don't know. Stephanie wasn't from Chicago, and she never...I don't know."

"It's all right," the boss said. "It's their job, not yours. Your job right now is to tell us about your brother."

"You think Eddie did this." It wasn't a question, and he couldn't get his voice any louder than a whisper.

"Did Eddie hurt you?" Chaz asked softly.

And oh God now that somebody finally asked, that question was so easy to answer, it was like falling down a well. "Yes," Dice said.

"Your hand."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Left hand's the Devil's hand." His voice sounded too far away, too spooky. "Dad taught us that."

He'd called his mother, the day after Eddie broke his hand, although he still wasn't quite sure why. He wasn't a kid anymore; he didn't think his mother could make everything all right.

She told him about Dad's bowling league, and the coaching he was doing at the Boys' Club, and Dice shut his eyes and remembered her voice twenty years ago: *You're Dyson Cieslewicz now, and this is your Dad. He adopted you and Eddie, Dyson, legally and everything, isn't that wonderful?* He remembered her fingers pinching his shoulder, telling him it *was* wonderful and he'd better agree. So he'd nodded, but that hadn't been enough. *Say thank you to your new dad, Dyson.*

Thank you.

Thank you, what? his mother prompted, her smile getting brighter, more fixed, and Dice had looked at his shoes--bulky, shiny black shoes that pinched his toes, shoes he only had to wear on Sunday, except he'd had to wear them today, and today was Tuesday--and whispered, *Thank you, Dad.*

He'd sat up that night, after Eddie was asleep and snuffling into the pillow, sat up and watched out the window for his father to come, to stand on the sidewalk and wave up at him and make this all not be real.

But Bobby Spivak didn't come. Bobby Spivak wasn't coming, wasn't coming back from wherever it was and whoever it was he'd run off to find, and it was the next morning that Dice had been buttering toast and Art Cieslewicz had turned him around, pinned him against the counter, and slapped him so hard he bit the inside of his cheek and tasted blood all morning. *No son of mine is going to be a sissy freak like that. You don't want to be like your father, do you, Dyson? DO YOU?*

And his mother, sitting at the table with Eddie, hadn't said a word.

Later, after the third time, the fourth time, she'd told him what lies to give his teachers. *Your dad's a good man, Dyson. He didn't have to adopt you, but he did. I've been unhappy a lot in my life, and it's not easy for a man to take on a woman with two children. You don't want to ruin this for me, do you?*

No, he didn't. He only wanted to be good, but he'd never been able to be good *enough.*

"Is Eddie left-handed?" asked the tank.

"Nah. Eddie learned. Not like me."

"Eddie *learned* not to be left-handed?"

"Dad made him. Said we didn't want to be like our father." Christ in a bucket, Cieslewicz, these people are not here to play Twenty Questions. "Our father--whatsit, biological father--he ran off when I was five and Eddie was two. Mom remarried, and he adopted us. So he's Dad. And he had this *thing* about being left-handed. He couldn't stand it, said it was the mark of Satan and everything. So he made us switch. Only I was never any good at it, and he beat the everloving shit out of me every couple months. Almost killed me when I was fifteen."

"And Eddie?"

"Eddie got the hang of the right-handed thing. Not a lefty at all. Except..."

It'd been easier for Eddie for some reason--because he was younger, because he was better coordinated, Dice didn't know. But Eddie went from using his left hand to using his right hand with nothing more than a spanking or two, and Dice was glad because he didn't want Eddie to hurt like he did half the time.

But Dad started saying there must be something really *wrong* with Dice, really *wicked*, if Eddie could learn to be right-handed and Dice couldn't. The left hand is the Devil's hand, Dad said, and the worst thing was when Eddie started saying it, too.

Eddie was too young to remember their father; Eddie was exactly the kind of son Dad wanted, the kind of son he could teach to box and take to the gym on weekends and brag about to his bowling league. Eddie practically worshipped Dad. Eddie wanted to be just like Dad. And now Eddie had--

The boss brought him back to now with, "Mr Cieslewicz? You said 'except'?"

"Oh, sorry. Right. Yeah. Except in the ring."

She leaned forward. "The ring?"

"Boxing."

"Eddie's a boxer," the tank said, like something was making sense to him now.

"Well, he was. He quit right after Christmas."

"About the same time he broke your hand?"

"Um. Yeah. About."

"Did you notice any other changes at that same time?" the boss asked. "Increased appetite? Mood swings?"

"Well, our grocery bills about tripled, if that's what you mean."

"You live with him?" said the tank.

"Yeah," Dice said, blushing now because he'd admitted Eddie hurt him, and the next obvious question was why he hadn't moved out, why he'd just hung around like a battered wife or something. He didn't have an answer to that, except that Eddie was his brother and until January he'd never...not even when they were kids...he'd parroted everything Dad said about being left-handed and being a freak and a sissy and wicked and wrong, but he'd never once *told*. Never once.

They didn't ask that question, though. They wanted to know about Eddie's schedule, where he was on particular days at particular times. And every time Dice had to say he didn't know, that it was Eddie's day off, or Eddie'd traded a shift with the other bouncer, or Dice had learned not to ask what Eddie did on the nights he didn't come straight home after work, their faces got grimmer and more certain.

"Would he ever have seen Stephanie Fisher play?" Chaz asked finally.

Dice's stomach was gone, there was just this cold hollow nothing. "Last week," he said. "The other guy wanted Thursday off. And Stephanie was good that night. I remember saying something to Eddie on the way home, and he just kind of grunted at me. But Eddie doesn't care about music much."

"And did he know we were here today?" the tank said.

"Yeah, I called, because, I mean, how often do you get the...oh god it's my fault. He went after Stephanie today because I...that's it, isn't it? It's my fault."

"No," Chaz said. "He's accelerating anyway, and it's his day off. He was probably planning--"

"If I'd had the guts to go to the police back in January, he wouldn't have got the chance to kill anybody at all. They would've locked him up or made him do therapy or something, wouldn't they?"

"We can't know," the boss said.

"And you didn't know," Chaz said, all wide-eyed again. "Did you?"

"No! I thought it was just me and Dad and the whole fucked-up thing. I thought it was *us*." Which, Jesus, sounded sick, but he didn't know how else to put it.

"Don't blame yourself for doing the best you could," Chaz said.

And the tank said, "One last question, Mr. Cieslewicz. Do you know where Eddie is now?"

Act IV

Reyes met his team in front of the Crystal Cave. Two SUVs full of FBI agents and Chaz Villette standing on the sidewalk, arguing with a skinny, ugly man who carried himself like an abuse victim. Reyes got out of Detective Bruckner's unmarked car and immediately started listening for clues.

"...look, I'm just saying that maybe if you let me *talk* to him, you wouldn't need a fucking SWAT team!"

"Mr. Cieslewicz," said Chaz, who was clearly trying to edit his response on the fly. More fieldwork, and he'd get the hang of it. "Your brother is one of a very rare kind of serial killer--I'm sorry," he added as Cieslewicz flinched, "I'm really sorry, but it's what he is, and..." Reyes watched him bite back the word *host*, bite back the word UNSUB, and finally settle lamely on, "people like him tend to be very resistant to capture."

"That's what I'm *saying!*" Cieslewicz said, almost bouncing with frustration. "Let me talk to him and maybe he won't be so resistant he has to end up dead!"

Chaz floundered, and Reyes said, "Let him come."

"Sir?" This time, what Chaz bit back looked a lot more like *Are you out of your mind?*

Reyes pulled him aside, out of earshot of Cieslewicz, though not quite out of earshot of the avidly listening Detective Bruckner. "It may be possible to bring Edward Cieslewicz in without bloodshed," Reyes said, unperturbed, knowing that Chaz would hear the subtext Bruckner wouldn't: *It may be possible to bring Edward Cieslewicz in alive.* "But it becomes a lot more possible if we have someone he can connect with."

"That's what hostage negotiators are trained for," Chaz said, giving him a skeptical look worthy of Falkner.

"No hostages," Reyes countered.

"That's what I'm trying to--" Chaz broke off, and the nature of the skepticism in his expression changed. "You think you've seen something."

"I think there's a reason Cieslewicz's first victim is still alive. And I think if we can use that to our advantage, we should do so. Chaz." That brought Chaz's gaze to his face, waiting. "I won't let him get hurt."

"All right," Chaz said and loped back over to Dyson Cieslewicz--who registered surprise, then nodded and followed Chaz back to where Reyes and Bruckner were waiting. Chaz performed introductions, and Reyes gave him a pleased nod for remembering. Dyson Cieslewicz shook hands and squinted at Reyes against the sun. "You really think I can help?"

The uncertainty was at odds with his earlier insistence; behind the barricading glasses, his eyes were gray and defenseless and asked his real question: *Do you really think you can save my brother?* Reyes gave him a reassuring smile and said, "Yes, I do."

*

The Cieslewicz brothers lived on the fourth floor of an ugly gray box of an apartment building three blocks from the Crystal Cave. Reyes and Brady

went up first, but there was no one in the apartment, and Brady radioed Falkner to let Cieslewicz in.

Reyes was bagging the blood-stained Gold's Gym t-shirt lying in the middle of the floor when Cieslewicz stepped into the apartment. He went a little green at the sight.

Reyes watched to be sure that was all. No, Cieslewicz wasn't going to contaminate the scene. "Mr. Cieslewicz, was your brother wearing this today?"

Cieslewicz swallowed and nodded.

"Look around," Brady said. "Anything else look out of place?"

"We don't usually keep the Bible on the kitchen table," Cieslewicz said.

"It's open to Matthew," said Reyes. "And he's left his wallet and keys on the table."

Cieslewicz squinted near-sightedly at the keys. "Everything's there but the apartment key. So he's either smoking in the courtyard" --Brady looked out the window and shook his head no-- "or he's in the basement."

"What's down there?" Reyes asked, while Brady talked to Falkner about covering exits from the building.

Cieslewicz shrugged, a tight motion almost like a shudder. "The laundry machines. Some storage lockers. Mr. Demarco's woodworking equipment."

"Anything he could use as a weapon?" Brady said. "As for example a gun?"

"I don't think so. Eddie's more likely to use his fists anyway." Then he blanched. Reyes had often wondered what it was like to learn that your loved one was a murderer several times over; he thought now, as he'd thought before, *It's like reaching out with a phantom limb.*

And then Cieslewicz's eyes widened. "Matthew Eighteen. Oh fucking *hell*." And before either Reyes or Brady could react, he turned and bolted, greyhound fast, and all they could do was run after him. Down the stairs, then down a dark, narrow hallway with the faint lingering smell of wet garbage. They caught him at the door to the basement. It was open, and the lights were on.

Brady got a grip on Cieslewicz's shoulder and said in a hard whisper, "You wanna explain what that was?"

"Matthew Eighteen-Eight. *If your hand or foot causes you to sin*..." He looked from Brady to Reyes, and Reyes saw knowledge in his eyes like death.

Understanding hit Brady an instant later, and Cieslewicz made a tiny noise of pain as his grip tightened for a split-second.

"Are you sure?" Reyes said, catching Cieslewicz's gaze and holding it.

"Yeah," Cieslewicz said. "I'm sure."

"All right." Either Eddie Cieslewicz had already cut his hand off and bled to death, in which case there was nothing dangerous left in the basement, or he was still trying to make up his mind. In which case, the sudden entrance of the FBI would almost certainly panic him into action, but his brother...

This was why he'd let Dyson Cieslewicz come along.

"You go down first," Reyes said in Cieslewicz's ear. "Try to get him to talk to you. Keep him as calm as you can."

Brady swelled like a bullfrog with objections, but Reyes caught his eye and stared him down.

As he'd expected, Cieslewicz did not protest that he couldn't keep Eddie calm; he probably prided himself on his ability to "handle" his brother. Reyes would have bet money that the pattern of abuse between them was of far longer duration than the presence of the anomaly.

Cieslewicz nodded jerkily and started down the stairs, calling, "Eddie? You down here?"

Brady and Reyes clearly heard the answering voice: "Dice?"

The clunk of Cieslewicz's boots on the stairs stopped. "Eddie? Where are you, man?"

"Don't come any closer, Dice." Eddie Cieslewicz didn't sound good.

"Eddie? You okay?"

"I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought if they wouldn't learn, they had to be... I couldn't teach everyone the way I taught you. And it made

sense. I knew that hand was bad, but when I realized how strong it was, like the hand of Samson, I thought I was getting a chance to, I dunno, redeem it. To do God's work, even with an unworthy tool. And you learned, didn't you, Dice? I did the right thing with you, didn't I?"

"Like hell," Brady muttered, only just loud enough for Reyes to hear.

"Eddie." The sound of Dice Cieslewicz descending another two, three steps. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't come any closer! And maybe I had it wrong. 'Cause I didn't use my left hand on you. I was careful. But I thought..." Eddie Cieslewicz's voice trailed off into indistinct muttering.

"What did you think?" Dice's footsteps changed as he reached the bottom of the stairs and moved from wood to concrete.

"I thought I could make things better. I thought I could make the world cleaner. But...the baby was crying, Dice. I could hear him all the way down the hall. And she couldn't. She couldn't hear her baby because I...

"Because you beat her to death," Dice said, not ungently. "Just like Dad almost did to me."

"Fuck!" Brady said, but Reyes held up his hand to keep him still.

"That wasn't right, was it?" Eddie said, and Reyes remembered that Dice was the elder of the brothers.

"No, Eddie, that wasn't right." Doc Martens scuffing over a concrete floor. "But it's good that you know that. It means you don't have to... Jesus fucking Christ, Eddie, would you get away from that thing?"

"I've been thinking about it," Eddie said. "And about what it says in Matthew. I looked it up when I got home." And he recited it, just as Dice had started to: "*If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire.*"

The whine of a table saw underlay the threat of everlasting fire, and now Reyes and Brady were both scrambling madly for the basement stairs. "Eddie," said Dice, his voice as shaky and strained as his brother's, "that's not necessary, man. I get that you're sorry--"

"FEDERAL AGENTS! FREEZE!" Brady roared, reverting to type, although Reyes would have freely admitted he didn't have a more subtle plan.

Edward Cieslewicz looked like someone had taken Dyson and fiddled with his aspect ratio: the same height, but twice as broad. And there was nothing gentle in Eddie's face.

Reyes was pleased to see that Dice had stayed out of his brother's reach, well away from the table saw's whirling scream. Brady moved instantly to interpose himself between Eddie and Dice; Reyes moved the other way, and Eddie's eyes tracked him.

"You are too fucking late, man," he said and brought his left wrist down squarely and hard onto the table saw's blade.

It was Dice who screamed. Eddie didn't make a sound.

Blood flew in a tremendous spattering arc, painting all of them with Eddie's sin. Reyes and Brady lunged for Eddie, but he used the anomaly's unnatural strength against himself, *pushing* against the saw blade, and when Brady tackled him away from the saw, Eddie's hand remained behind.

Dyson Cieslewicz, screaming obscenities, dragged his t-shirt off and shouldered Brady aside. He began applying pressure to the stump of his brother's left wrist.

Brady told the radio to *call for a fucking ambulance and hurry!*

Entirely automatically, Reyes turned the saw off. And flinched from the still warm touch of Eddie Cieslewicz's left hand.

Act V

The hospital was nice and gave Dice something clean to wear, his own clothes being pretty much soaked in Eddie's blood and confiscated by the FBI to boot. Which was fine, when he thought about it. Because how often were you going to wake up and think, *Yeah, today I want to wear the shirt I used to keep my brother from bleeding to death after he cut off his own hand on purpose*?

Not very fucking often, was Dice's feeling.

So he felt kind of ridiculous, in those blue hospital-type pajamas and his ratty sneakers and his leather jacket that some FBI guy had been nice enough to bring along, but at least he didn't look like prom night in *Carrie* and he didn't have to deal with the smell anymore. And they'd stuck him in a little waiting room, not out there in the freakshow of the ER waiting room, for which he was profoundly grateful, thank you, hospital.

He sat on one of the little flowery couches and tried to pretend he was reading a magazine, although he wasn't even seeing the pictures, never mind the words. And his hands were shaking, but he was ignoring them. Every once in a while, he'd have to squeeze his eyes shut and wait out a huge cramping shudder, but then he'd look back at the magazine and maybe even remember to turn the page.

And then his parents came in.

Mom was crying and Dad looked sort of pissed off and sort of confused, which was a very bad look and everything in Dice staggered into Red Alert for, God, the fourth or fifth time that day and wasn't Thursday ever going to *end?*

"Dyson!" Mom said, or kind of wailed. "What *happened?*"

Dice stood up, purely on instincts that said *don't let him stand over you* and *don't let him get between you and the door* and *don't let him trap you*, and his mouth opened and said, "Well, Mom, Eddie went batshit crazy."

Mom covered her face and sobbed. Dad's head snapped around, and he said, "Don't speak to your mother like that."

Which, okay, Dice hadn't meant to. The words had just come out, and he would've taken them back if he could.

But.

He knew exactly why he was scared of his stepfather, down to the tally of broken bones (seven--two up on Eddie: three ribs, his left forearm, his nose, his left cheekbone, and oh yeah, his skull). But standing there in his leather jacket and blue hospital pajamas, like a refugee from a movie about Hell's Angel nurses, with the memory of Eddie's blood still under his fingernails, he looked at Art Cieslewicz and thought, *Why did I ever care about you?* He

said, "Sorry. I guess watching Eddie cut his own freaking hand off has got me kind of rattled."

Mom sobbed louder, and Dad was torn between comforting her and tearing strips off Dice. Which was, all in all, a really great moment for the tank to stick his head in and say, "Mr. Cieslewicz, could we speak to you for a moment?"

"Sure," Dice said.

"Who the hell is that?" Dad demanded.

The guy who arrested Eddie, Dice almost said, but the tank got there first.

"Daniel Brady, FBI," he said and shook hands. He didn't yield a millimeter to Dad's grip, just grinned toothily and gripped back, hard enough that Dad *almost* winced. "You must be Arthur Cieslewicz. The local field office will have an agent here to speak to you in, oh, about two minutes. I just need a minute of your stepson's time." He raised his eyebrows at Dice. "Coming?"

"You bet," Dice said and, looking down at his magazine as he abandoned it, discovered he'd spent the last hour staring at a copy of *Modern Maternity*.

Chaz was waiting in the hall, and he gave Dice this weird grimace that Dice decided was probably supposed to be a supportive sort of smile. "We're heading back to D.C., but we just wanted to tell you a little about what's going to happen next."

"That ain't your job, is it?"

"Um," said Chaz, and "Not exactly," said Brady.

They looked at each other, and Brady went on, "Cases like your brother's are a little unusual, and there are things that--"

Chaz leapt in: "If we don't tell you, nobody will."

"He's going to go to a secure facility in Ashton, Virginia," Brady said. "It's called Idlewood. He'll be confined, but the doctors will do their best to be sure he's comfortable."

"There are drugs that help," Chaz said. "Sometimes."

"He'll have access to books and DVDs and music. After he's settled, you'll be able to write letters to him, although all his correspondence will be

monitored."

"You can visit, if you want," Chaz said.

"This Idlewood place get many visitors?" Dice said.

"No. But it's an *option,*" Chaz said earnestly. "We didn't want you not to know you had the option."

"Thanks."

"What he is, it isn't his fault," Chaz said. "It's...it's like an illness."

"That's what they always say about crazy people."

"No. I mean, yes, but no, that wasn't quite what I meant. What happened to Eddie..." He looked helplessly at Brady.

Brady sighed. "This is where we say we can't talk about our job. But it's true, what Chaz says. Something *happened* to Eddie. It's no more his fault than it would be if he'd been hit by a car."

"You aren't talking about the batshit crazy part."

"No," said Brady at the same time Chaz said, "Yes." They glowered at each other.

Their bosslady came out of the stairwell and said, "Do you want on this plane, or would you rather walk home?"

Dice shook hands with Brady--who made no effort at all to crush his knuckles--and then with Chaz. Chaz's handshake was awkward, kind of like shaking hands with a folding chair, but for sure the opposite of a dead fish, and he said, "It's complicated. But I've never seen anybody fight the...well, the *infection* the way Eddie did. And you care about him, right?"

"Yeah." Because he did. Because Eddie was his brother and had never told on him and hadn't killed him, either, although Dice could do the math on all the other dead left-handed people and knew he should have been one of them. "Ashton, you said?"

Chaz smiled at him--and wow, he had a *really* nice smile when he pulled it out--and said, "Yeah. Ashton, Virginia." He slung his bag over his shoulder, gave Dice an awkward little wave, and followed Brady toward the stairs.

Dice watched him go, hearing his parents' voices rising in a fight behind him, and wondered if they'd let him in to see Eddie before they took him away. He wanted to let Eddie know he wasn't giving up.

*

Reyes glowered around the briefing room. "How many of you are left-handed?"

Brady closed his fingers around his coffee mug and looked down the table.

Hafidha raised her hand.

Chaz, at Brady's left shoulder, said, "Um."

"Yes, Dr. Villette?" Reyes said.

Chaz raised both hands. "I confess! Ambidextrous! Maybe a little left-dominant."

"You write with your right hand," Worth objected.

Chaz shrugged one of his complicated shrugs, the kind that made him look like he had too many joints. "Actually, I write with both. But trying to find a left-handed desk is a pain."

"Left-handed by birth, right-handed by the grace of the Las Vegas Public School System," Todd suggested.

"Something like that. But it's not a trauma or anything. Besides, I like fountain pens."

"You can really write with either hand?" Worth said. "How 'bout a demonstration?"

"Okay. Um." He leaned over and snagged the ballpoint out of Brady's fingers.

"Hey!" Brady protested, *pro forma*.

"Just wait. Uncle Chaz is going to do a magic trick." He thought a moment and wrote, right handed, *when you stare persistently into an abyss, the abyss also stares into you.* Then he flipped the pen neatly into his left hand and wrote the same phrase. The writing was a little different, a little back-slanted, but clear and precise and still quite obviously Charles Villette's handwriting.

"Wow," Worth said, mock-solemn.

"No, no," Chaz said. "That's not the magic trick. This is." And still left-handed, he wrote, swiftly and fluidly, the same phrase for the third time, indistinguishable from how he'd written it right-handed, except flawlessly reversed.

"Mirror writing," Reyes said, with that look in his eye, the one Brady hated, the one that said what Stephen Reyes really wanted most in this world was a chance to open up Chaz Villette's skull and go poking around inside.

"Yeah," Chaz said, a little uncomfortably. "The funny thing is, when I learned how to write initially, I didn't do that. But when I figured out that my teachers would get on my case less if I was right-handed, and I switched, my left hand started doing that." He jabbed the pen at the line of mirror writing. "So basically I learned to write three times, once with my right hand and twice with my left, and whoa, off-topic, sorry about that." He looked back at Reyes. "Was there a reason you wanted to know?"

"Seventy-two percent of anomalous individuals for whom we have these data are left handed," Reyes said.

Falkner gave him an exasperated look. "So are you."

"But that *is* significant, statistically speaking," Chaz said, although he didn't sound happy about it, "given that the occurrence of left-side dominance in the population as a whole is only fifteen to twenty-five percent. Higher for people of Asian descent."

"Right-handed, thank you," Lau said.

Todd tipped his chair back and said loudly to the ceiling, "Correlation is not causation."

"But it's a very suggestive correlation," Reyes said.

Chaz said, almost too softly to be heard, "The left hand is the Devil's hand," and gave Brady back his pen.

Four Horsemen

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C.
February, 2002

Reyes leaned against the doorframe, fiddling with the string of his tea bag. "You're a natural for this one."

Todd observed that why, yes, he could still be surprised. "No, no. I'm unnatural for everything. It's my defining character note."

People Reyes smiled at had to be good at sorting out which smile-shaped expression they were getting. This was the slow, almost-comfortable one. Could be good, could be a rain of frogs. Todd reserved judgment.

"Exactly." Reyes squeezed the tea bag between thumb and two fingers and flicked it into the trash. "Come see me when you get a break. I'll fill you in."

"Are there four horsemen involved?"

Reyes pushed away from the doorframe. His smile widened alarmingly. "Not yet."

Todd watched him down the hall and around the corner out of sight. "Mama told me not to come," he sighed.

Oranges

Somewhere over Kansas, April, 2007

On an airplane somewhere over Kansas, it occurred to Daphne that she had never seen anyone eat oranges as Esther Falkner did. It seemed to require such concentration, the sleeves of her gray-and-violet striped suitcoat pushed up her etched forearms as she first slit the rind with a thumbnail. Peeling it back in ragged petals released the rich scent of citrus oil, made bitterer when she meticulously scraped the pith off the membrane. Most people would have stopped there, or a little before, but Falkner turned the fruit in her hand, inspecting it for lingering shreds of pith and for veins, picking each one off and adding it to a tidy pile on her napkin until the naked fruit rested on her palm, a translucent, unblemished segmented sphere.

On the other side of the table Brady still talked, but Daphne didn't register a word. She was concentrating on the care with which Falkner pulled each segment away from the rest and cleaned the thin white veins between them, piling the pieces of fruit tidily. There was an entire profile in that set of mannerisms.

The process took the better part of half an hour. When Falkner had finished, she looked up and found Daphne staring. Daphne glanced down quickly.

"Worth?"

She looked up. Falkner was offering her an orange segment, between long fingers. "You looked hungry."

Daphne smiled awkwardly, waving the segment away, but Falkner didn't pull it back. "Watching you peel an orange is performance art. I'd never have the patience."

"Oranges were a treat, when I was growing up. So I made them last." Falkner shrugged her Mom shrug, the one that was just a dip of one ear towards a shoulder, as if her arms were full of something unwieldy. "Besides, I don't like the bitter parts. Go on, take it."

She wasn't going to put her hand down until Daphne accepted the orange. So Daphne did, and so she wouldn't have to answer, bit it in half. "Thank

you," she said, when the juice had run down her throat, stinging at the back of her tongue.

"They also taste better when you share them." Falkner stuffed a segment into her own mouth, leaving Daphne to wonder if she'd imagined that wink.

shadow unit

1.04 "A Handful of Dust" - by Will Shetterly

"The beauty of the world has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder." -- Virginia Woolf

Click here to play music.

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Act I

Dallas, TX, February 22, 2001

Every time he used the key, he thought it was the best kind of commitment. A ring says you're bound. A key says you're free.

He stepped into the condo without saying a word. Normally, he would call, "Honey, I'm home!" because he knew his sense of humor sucked, but it was the best he had, and while love does not mean never having to say you're sorry, it does mean a sucky sense of humor will get you a smile. Or a kiss. Or a command to strip fast.

He came in quietly because he expected the place to be quiet. Today was a government holiday, and they had plans to spend the day together until Maria Cortez, age four, went missing in the 66 acres of the Dallas Arboretum. When he had said, "There's a little deaf girl missing. They want volunteers," he had instantly heard, "Go be a hero, Danny. The DA's office is swamped, so I'll spend the day bailing. Meet tonight at your place for a hero's return?"

So he had grinned and clipped his shield and weapon under his jacket and hurried away, praying, "Sweet Jesus, please let me want a hero's return." Too many bad things happened to lost girls. Each second Maria Cortez was missing increased the odds that she would not be coming back.

But thirty-five minutes after he arrived at the site, a K-9 from Texas Response Unit Search & Rescue had found Maria Cortez napping under a

rose bush. So he hadn't found her? He had answered the call. That's what heroes do. He figured he deserved a reward.

And he figured he wasn't the only one. They had both chosen duty over fun. His idea of a nice surprise was coming home to steaks on the grill, cold beer in the fridge, and someone willing to try anything once. Or three times. He had phoned to say Maria Cortez was hugging the nice police doggie, but no one answered. He had considered calling the office, but that's one of the rules of an affair: don't call. A good boyfriend knows to let working dogs work.

Since he had been too early to be the surprised, he was happy to be the surpriser. Now, carrying a grocery sack with a six of Coors, two steaks, frozen hash browns, and chopped salad toward the kitchen, he thought, *Yeah, man. Good boyfriend. I would so marry me.* He glanced down at the two home keys on his ring, nodded in satisfaction, pocketed the ring, and headed in.

Then he frowned. Music came from the back of the condo. One of their rules for being together was that Brady kept his love of country rock in his Mustang and his own apartment.

But someone was playing "The Devil Went Down to Georgia."

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J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., July 18, 2007, 6:15 PM

Esther Falkner was staying late because Ben had called saying his clients were idiots, and the girls were having dinner with their Aunt Gilda, and Esther had spent thirty minutes of the work day composing her best answer to an email that consisted of, "I love you, Mom. Is Dad the only man who doesn't suck?" She had started reading Lau's letter to a journalist that explained how the Anomalous Crimes Task Force was the FBI's version of a cold cases squad when a shadow filled her office doorway and stayed there. "Brady?"

He never waited at the door. Why, she wondered, don't we notice what people never do until they do it? When the door was open, Brady always marched into her office and stopped in front of her desk as if he was fighting the urge to salute.

At the sound of her voice, he walked in as always. But this time, he set a manila folder on the corner of her desk. "My report."

She frowned, wondering if she should ask why he hadn't emailed it. She said, "That could've waited until tomorrow."

He said, "Respectfully, no." Before she could shape a question, he turned on his heel. She watched his broad back as he walked out and thought, *The reporter can wait another day to be bored.*

She picked up the folder and glanced inside. Below the date, the report began, "The ACTF's involvement began this morning at--"

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Queens, NY, 2:40 AM

Jennifer Kahn saw the empty parking space and smiled. She would have been home six hours earlier, but her boss at the 76 Club had begged her to work the after-dinner shift for a bartender who called in sick, and the night had dragged on with cranky customers and tiny tips. Now, in the deadest hours of the night, she had been sure she would spend twenty minutes cruising Queens for a space. Finding one so close to home was a gift. It could only have been better if it had been near a street light.

She parked, picked up her cell, speed-dialed, and said, "DH? I got lucky. In about five minutes, so will you."

The DH said sleepily, "Deal. I'll dress and be out--"

"Grab a robe and wait by the door. I'm half a block away."

"Score! Heading down."

He would want her to stay in the car until he opened the building's front door, but he was on his way, and they lived in a neighborhood where people looked out for each other, and she had decided in her teens that if her choice was freedom or fear, the decision was easy. So she grabbed her purse, got out of the cool car into the moist night, took two steps for the sidewalk, and froze.

A man lay on his side in the dark shadow of a tree. He had thick stubble on his cheek. His shirt was rumpled as if he'd been wearing it for as long as he hadn't shaven. He stank of sweat and shit.

She grimaced. The aches in her legs and back reminded her what it meant to work hard. Why shouldn't she just give up like this bum and stay high all the time?

But she didn't have to sleep under a tree. He couldn't be comfortable. She looked back at him. His suit, shirt, and tie were new, rumpled but much more expensive than anyone from this neighborhood would wear.

The DH's voice came from her cell. "Jen? I thought you were close."

"Here." She waved down the block at the figure in the green terrycloth bathrobe by the door to their building.

He waved back. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. There's a guy--"

As she walked around the man, she saw his lips were parted. Something gray filled his mouth and flecked the stubble on his chin. Thick lines were drawn on his forehead.

Not lines. Letters.

Not drawn. Carved.

She stumbled back, gasped, and looked around.

The DH shouted "Jen!" and started running toward her in his flip-flops.

She clicked *end* on her cell and punched 9-1-1.

*

Alexandria, VA, 3:20 AM

Daniel Brady was thinking about nothing but sweet sensation when the hookup--Kelly?--said, "You like that?"

Brady grunted, "Unh," trusting--Kerry?--could hear that Texans don't talk when talking doesn't matter, then realized K-whatever--or Cory?--didn't know him and couldn't guess what one syllable meant. Feeling generous, he added, "Huh."

"You like me?"

Enough to be in a strange bed, Brady thought, but knew he couldn't say. He couldn't remember Kellykerrycory's name, but that was part of the rules:

1. When working, forget nothing.

2. When playing, forget everything.

Brady said, "I. Fucking. Love. This." That must've been enough, because then they were just strangers making each other feel like all that mattered was happening and what didn't matter could wait forever. Kelly or Cory was lean and dark, with rough callused palms. That was good. Brady had always thought his type was lean and dark, until he had met An--

Don't think of elephants. Corykelly just wants what you want, a good time. Just like-- Don't think of elephants.

Afterward, he wanted to sleep, but Cory or--Kini. The hookup's name was Kini, or at least, that's what it was at Someplace Quiet. Kini said, "That was a damn fine ride, Lone Ranger."

Brady wanted to say his cell was vibrating, but it was in his jacket across the room. He needed to get a Bureau gadgeteer to fix a phone so he could say something that normally would never cross his lips, like "I sure do fancy a latte," and it would ring. How could he convince a gadgeteer that would help him kill monsters? He said, "Yeah. Glad I ran into you, Silver."

Kini laughed. "Run into me Friday, same time, same place. I like being run into."

One of the big rules applied: Don't lie unless you have to. "Like I said. Tonight only."

"Oh," Kini said in a quiet way so much like Andre that Brady wanted to dive naked out the window and risk the three-story fall. Then he laughed in a way that was nothing at at all like Andre and reached for another condom. "Well, hell, Texas, we got hours to go till dawn!"

A rule applied there, too: *Never* turn down a good time.

Brady grinned. "I reckon so."

And his cell rang.

"Fuck!" Brady was across the bedroom so fast Kini was staring. Brady said, "Duty," as he glanced at the screen, praying for a wrong number. He saw what he expected: *WTF?*

Kini frowned. Brady thought, *Question mark. Not a period. Not an exclamation. I could stay for another round or two, and in the morning*--

Brady said, "Work. Gotta go," and began dressing at top speed: jeans, red and black snakeskin Tony Llama's, a loose white silk shirt.

"You're a doctor? No way."

Don't lie unless you have to. "Fireman. If they call, it's like to be bad."

"But--"

He wanted to run out, but he could hear Andre saying, "Damn it, Danny, just ask yourself, 'What would an asshole do?' and do something else."

He gave Kini a kiss, said, "Thanks for a great night," and ran from the apartment toward his pickup and the sweet, dark promise of monsters that could kill him.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C., 4:35 AM

"The first known victim of the Trash Talking Killer was found in December," Nikki Lau said as the photo flashed on the briefing room's monitor. "Amanda Jones, age seventeen. High school student, B-plus average. Cause of death, drowning in a tub of New York City water, based on the traces in her clothes and lungs. Chaz, you can sleep on the plane."

Chaz Villette slapped his hand over his mouth to hide his yawn and shook his head, making Lau think, as usual, of Charlie at the Daily Coyote website. "Rushing oxygen to the brain," Chaz said. "People should be complimented when someone yawns in front of them."

"In the Chazverse," said Hafidha Gates. She rested her chin on her knuckles while she silently conducted a dialogue with her laptop. Probably pulling in more information about the dead girl and the Trash Talking Killer while IMing either or both of her current flirtations, cute boys in Singapore and Dubai.

Stephen Reyes raised an eyebrow. Lau wondered if he had been a Mr. Spock fan when he was young. Thinking about Stephen Reyes as a young Trekkie was especially difficult at four-thirty in the morning when discussing a murder.

Lau said, "No sign of sexual assault or torture."

Daniel Brady, who must assume his fellow profilers wouldn't notice the smell of Unforgivable and sweat or wonder why he was wearing a black T-shirt from his go bag, said, "She looks Asian."

Lau nodded. The girl on the screen could have been one of her cousins. "Adopted from China." Lau clicked to the next picture. " Like all of TTK's known victims, she was found on a curb in a quiet part of New York City sometime between two and five a.m. In her case, Chinatown's factory district."

"Like trash," Esther Falkner said quietly.

"He was done. He didn't need a dump site he could linger at or revisit," Reyes suggested.

Sol Todd asked, "Is TTK a name he chose?"

Lau shook her head. "Thank the *Post*. It's purely for his signature." She clicked to a close-up of the dead girl's face. "After death, her mouth was stuffed with dirt, almost certainly from a vacuum cleaner. Its owner likes Rice Crispies and short-haired gray cats."

"DNA present?" Daphne Worth asked, in ears-pricked posture.

"Not that matches anyone in the NCIC database."

She clicked to the next image. "Janice McArthur. Age seventy-two. Cause of death, asphyxiation. She successfully swallowed the first joints of her eight smaller toes, but she choked to death on her left big toe. Her right big toe was nicked, as if TTK started to cut it, then saw she was dying. The bruising on her wrists and ankles is consistent with steel handcuffs. No sign of sexual assault."

Lau clicked to the next, a man whose skin was even darker than Reyes'. "Three weeks later, Rodney Johnson of Athens, Georgia, an insurance adjuster visiting for a conference, was found in Brooklyn. Age fifty-four." She kept from glancing at Todd; everyone except Worth had been at Todd's fifty-fourth birthday. "Wrists and ankles had rope burns. Fingernails and toenails were torn out. Body was covered with cigarette burns. Cause of death was cardiac arrest. His wife and a female prostitute that he frequented

believe he was exclusively heterosexual, but there was semen in his stomach and anus. Which does match the DNA found on the previous victims."

Lau heard a sound that Brady sometimes made, a tock! with his tongue against the roof of his mouth like the cocking of a gun, but she didn't look at him, either.

Worth frowned. "Is TTK a team? Drowning, torture..."

Chaz added, "Did I miss what's anomalous about this? It's *weird*, but--"

Lau raised her index and said, "Ah," channeling her mother. "There are more." She clicked the screen. "Mohammad Hussein from Queens. Accountant. Age twenty-seven. Cause of death, sudden cardiac arrest. But he had no history of heart disease. If he hadn't been found on a curb with a mouthful of dirt, no one would've thought there was foul play."

Reyes said, "Frost saw his files?"

Lau nodded. "And pronounced them boring." She clicked to the next picture. "John Waters. Barrista. Age thirty-two. Cause of death, cardiac arrest. No history of heart trouble. Frost said still boring." Lau clicked again. "Marilyn Leister-Rose. Lawyer. Age twenty-nine, cardiac arrest. Frost said repetition is especially boring." She clicked again. "Susan Watkins. Hairdresser. Age forty-two. Cardiac arrest. Frost said repetition may be suspicious, but it's still boring."

"The first cases fit a torture scenario," Worth said. "But to go from torture to inducing heart attacks? If it was the same UNSUB, wouldn't the cruelty get worse?"

"How often could a gamma kill and revive someone?" Chaz asked.

Lau, listening to the quiet room, thought, *Every time I think he's a sweet boy, he says something like that.*

Reyes narrowed his eyes at the monitor. "Would multiple heart attacks in a short period of time show up in an autopsy?"

"I'll call Frost--"

"Before breakfast, with something that could be boring? It can wait for office hours."

She smiled gratefully and clicked again. A shot of a man lying on a curb. "The latest. Walter Mascomb of Peoria, Illinois. He and his wife came to New York for a theater weekend three days ago. He went out after lunch to visit book stores. He was found a little over an hour ago. Preliminary investigation shows no obvious cause of death. But he had a mouth full of dirt." She clicked to a close-up of the man's forehead. "And this."

The letters carved into his forehead spelled in block print, "FEAR."

Worth said, "That was done after he died."

Lau nodded.

Brady said, "He's escalating. Or they are."

"It's a message," Reyes said. "He wants more than he's getting."

Hafidha said, "Could be initials. F.E.A.R. I'll search--"

Sol Todd raised his hand, then turned it over, cupped. "A couple ounces from a vacuum cleaner? Like a handful?"

Lau nodded.

"'I will show you fear in a handful of dust.' T. S. Eliot. *The Wasteland*. He's giving us a clue."

"Which proves he's a gamma?" asked Chaz.

"Or an English professor?" asked Worth. "Or a writer?"

Todd shrugged. "Proves he can Google a good quote."

"Hound of the Baskervilles," Hafidha said without looking up from her screen.

Todd smiled. "Never took you for a Sherlockian, my good Miss Gates."

Hafidha glanced up at him. "It's elementary, my dear Todd. Jeremy Brett's hot."

Worth said, "Uh, should I say, 'huh?' or just squint and scratch my head?"

"Sir Baskerville died of a heart attack," Chaz told her. "Induced by fear. There've been studies after earthquakes and air raids. Death rates soar. But it mostly affects the elderly--"

Hafidha, staring back at her monitor, said, "I got a doctor saying children with no prior heart disease have died on amusement park rides."

Falkner said, "Terrified to death. Like trapped birds." She looked at Lau.

Right. Herd the cats. Lau clicked again. A balding, middle-aged man with a fringe of beard and wire-rimmed glasses appeared on screen. "Tony D'Angelo, jazz guitarist. He didn't show up for a Greenwich Village gig after flying from LA to JFK."

"Jazz musicians--" Reyes began.

"He never missed a gig. His manager said he got more work for being dependable than for being brilliant." Realizing she had cut him off, Lau hesitated. Reyes nodded slightly, and she thought, *Ah. Rudeness is fine with the boss when it's efficient. I mustn't abuse this power*.

Falkner said, "Is there a reason to connect D'Angelo and TTK?"

Lau shook her head., "We just know there's no good reason for D'Angelo to be missing, and TTK's timing is speeding up. The last three were in the last twenty days. Even if the next isn't D'Angelo, and TTK isn't a gamma, my friend expects another body soon." She turned toward Reyes' frown. "Detective Victor Zhiang of the Fifth Precinct." She saw Chaz flinch at the name. Chaz was always easier to read when he was underslept.

Reyes said, "That's it?"

Lau nodded, hiding a sudden worry. When Vic's call woke her, the case had screamed *gamma, gamma, gamma*. But now, if Reyes thought she had wasted everyone's time--

Reyes looked around the room.

Brady said, "Someone might have a source for heart attack victims."

Falkner glanced at him. "You think that's likely?"

Brady shook his head. "Just wanted to check it off the list."

Worth said, "I can't think of a way to induce heart attacks that doesn't leave electrical burns or drug residue."

Reyes lifted his chin. "What's different about the last victim?" The Stephen Reyes School of Socratic Profiling, Brady called it. Lau bit the side of her

tongue to keep back an inappropriate snicker.

"The disfigurement," Chaz answered promptly.

Falkner leaned forward, one hand on the back of Brady's chair. "Specifically, the word 'Fear.' That's what he wants."

Reyes smiled. "The random targeting of victims. The apparently impossible cause of death. The public dumping of the bodies. Even dropping the torture components: the most horrific details aren't as frightening as what you *can't* see. What you can only imagine."

"Scaring the victims isn't enough for him now." Brady's voice was rough with lack of sleep, and maybe something else, too. "He wants to scare the city."

Reyes turned his hands palms-up, a magician's reveal. "The dirt in the mouth. You will return to dust. I have that power over any one of you. The city was missing the message, so he wrote it on the victim's forehead."

"And the anomaly seeks to maximize pain." Todd sat back in his chair and shoved his hands in his jacket pockets.

Chaz nodded "I don't have to be pattern-boy to know the odds--"

"Say which way to bet," Hafidha finished.

Todd said, "My spider sense is tingling."

"We might be able to help," Falkner said. "Even if it's not a gamma."

Reyes turned his gaze to Lau. "They called. We should reinforce that by going." He glanced around the briefing room. "Lau, you and Brady." He tightened his lips. "Chaz. And--" He glanced from Worth to Todd.

Todd stretched. "New York's the sixth circle of hell, but that's my favorite."

"Todd," Reyes agreed, pushing his chair back from the table. "The rest of you, go home and sleep late. That's an order."

Falkner said, "If there's a gamma who's killed eight or more people--"

"Then I need a well-rested backup team," Reyes said. "And I get to argue for a bigger discretionary budget." He looked at Lau, Brady, Chaz, and Todd. "Don't do anything to improve my case."

Todd said, "Miz Todd didn't raise no heroes."

Reyes gave his rare, sudden smile. "Good. Just remember--"

Chaz said, "We don't learn anything from dead gammas."

Brady grunted, or maybe just cleared his throat, and looked at the ceiling.

Reyes' smile grew wider as he stood. "My work here is done. Any of the rest of you wants to make brownie points, show up at 10:55. I'll be in at eleven. And, for the record, if you get a question mark call in the middle of the night--" He turned his gaze to Falkner. "And you've got family--" He looked at Worth. "Or someone you think of as family--" He looked at Brady. "Or you're just having a good night, do not come in."

Falkner said, "Everyone knows that."

"It's the obeying part that concerns me."

"And do you take your own advice, *Herr Doktor*?" Hafidha asked.

Reyes paused at the door. "I have an obsession, Agent Gates. That gets people killed. So I need the rest of you to have professions."

As Hafidha's expression softened slightly, Brady said, "I hear that."

Good old cowboy, Lau thought. *Nothing fazes him.*

Act II

Dallas, TX, February 22, 2001

The bedside alarm must've gone off accidentally. But if so, why was it playing Charlie Daniels, and why was it playing loudly? Andre liked quiet music that demanded all your attention or let you talk over it.

Brady turned from the kitchen and started down the hall. The carpet was quiet under his boots. The grocery sack hung heavily from his left fist. Was there a smell he didn't recognize, a strange aftershave, or was he imagining things?

Maybe Andre had the same idea he did. Maybe Andre was in the bedroom preparing a surprise, and the honkytonk was setting the mood. Brady liked

that notion. He should tiptoe out of the condo and wait for Andre's call, or maybe come in again, calling Andre's name--

But Andre had said he would come to Brady's house.

It didn't make sense. Which was fine. Whatever it was was Andre's business. A good boyfriend knew to respect--

Brady heard a moan, just below the devil's driving fiddlework. Not a moan he had ever heard. Andre was with someone.

He stopped still in the hall. What did that mean? Not long after they had exchanged keys, they had said they were too old for the party scene. Why not settle down and play safe?

He thought, *Okay. Andre decided to have some fun without me. Ain't no reason to go all Gloomy Gus. Head on home and hear him out when he calls. If he calls. Of course he'll call. Christ, Brady, don't be an asshole about this. Just get the fuck out fast and pretend you're the most macho cowboy ever when he calls. A gentleman in a gentlemen's couple's entitled to a gentleman friend, right? Decide later if this is something a cowboy should cry about.*

Biting his lower lip, he turned back toward the living room.

And as he turned, he heard a gasp cutting through the music. Not pleasure. Pain. *Some fuckhead's hurting Andre!* he thought, hitting the bedroom door with the heel of his hand, slamming it open.

*

July 18, 2007

Tony D'Angelo listened to his heart. The room muffled sound, making each beat grow dull and drain away, like dampening a drum. If-- When he got out, he would use that. A Poe concept album. Tell-tale Heart. Cask of Amontillado. That one with the swinging blade, lowering with each pass.

Did Poe stories ever end well?

He didn't want to think about the ammonia smell of the mattress under him. Maybe it was good he couldn't see anything.

But nothing he could see would be worse than what he could imagine. Would it?

Think positive. He couldn't smell anything worse than ammonia. He couldn't hear anything worse than his heart. He couldn't feel anything around him besides the mattress beneath him, the cool air around him, and the smooth bands of fabric covering his eyes and binding his wrists and ankles.

Did someone think a New York gig meant he had money? Leaving his family for a night meant he *needed* money. Did they mistake him for the front man? He wasn't someone a kidnapper would target. L.A. was full of session musicians at least as good as he was. Did anyone even know he was missing yet? Why had he told Cassie it would be a late night, so he would call in the morning? The club had undoubtedly cursed his name and started phoning every local player who might be free. They wouldn't even bitch about him to his agent yet.

Was his ax all right? Bad enough to be locked in the dark for no reason. But if he got out, he would really like to have his favorite guitar, too.

What if they wanted to cut off a finger to mail to someone? Why couldn't he think of any nine-fingered session guitarists?

Don't think about why the room muffles sound. Maybe there are just a lot of drapes or cardboard around. What's creepier, being trapped in a room designed as a cage or in one that simply works as a cage?

Depends on who caged him.

Was it morning? Were Aretha and Billie asking Cassie when Daddy was coming home? Why had he accepted a gig on the right side of the continent when everything he needed was on the left?

He twisted suddenly, testing his bonds. The cloth didn't give. Cloth must mean no one wanted to hurt him, right?

He wanted to sleep, but how do you defend yourself when you're asleep?

He thrashed with all his strength, knowing that doing nothing would do nothing, but doing something might make things worse. His heartbeat rocketed, a pure heavy metal-beat: *break free kill the fucker, break free kill the fucker, break free kill the fucker--*

And as each beat died in the cool, stale air, it whimpered, *Dear god don't let me die, dear god--*

This wasn't about money.

*

Fifth Precinct, New York City, NY, 7:30 AM

In the bustling front room of New York's oldest station house , smiling at them--no, at Lau--as they approached, Detective Zhiang looked way too much like Tony Leung for Chaz to like him. No one who looked like a Hong Kong pop star should be calling Nikki Lau in the middle of the night.

Zhiang said, "Nikki. Glad you could come."

Chaz thought, *On the job now. Grow up, Chaz*.

Then Lau's smile made him think, *If Zhiang makes her smile like that, he better be okay.* Lau said, "Likewise, Vic. Meet Special Agents Sol Todd, Daniel Brady, and Chaz Villette."

Zhiang shook hands with Todd and Brady. "I've heard a lot about you two."

Todd said, "Outrageous lies. When I use both hands, I can find my ass with ease."

Brady added, "Once I lend him a mirror."

Zhiang grinned. Cops always seemed to know how to talk to other cops. Zhiang turned to Chaz. His handshake was too perfectly firm. He said, "Since you're working with Nikki, I know I'll hear good things about you, too."

Chaz nodded. So Lau didn't talk about him. Better that than one of the alternatives. *Be manly. If you tighten up, your voice will get higher. Better yet, do the Brady thing and say nothing*. He said, "This is the old Five Points neighborhood. That's so cool!"

As Chaz thought, *What part of say nothing didn't I understand?* Zhiang nodded. "The neighborhood's gotten boring lately. But not boring enough." He led them deeper into the station house. "I'd offer you coffee, but trust me, you don't want it."

Chaz held up his coffee cup and a bag of bagels. "Merit badge in urban survival."

Which made Lau smile. If all you can be is someone's clown, well, that's a privilege you should treasure.

The break room was larger than the WTF's briefing room. But no matter how much Victor Zhiang looked like Tony Leung, he did not have a jet. Unfortunately, Chaz saw no way to slip that into the conversation.

As they sat, Lau said, "What else can you tell us?"

"Besides what you have already?" Zhiang shrugged. "Amanda Jones had a boyfriend her parents didn't know about. He was at a birthday party upstate that night. John Waters was into the S&M club scene. The night he disappeared, he'd been at a wedding party that was whitebread enough for the Disney channel."

Todd shuddered. "Don't get me going about Disney and innocence."

Zhiang said, "Touché. But we didn't find anything interesting there. Janice McArthur went to a matinee of "Rent" with a man she was secretly seeing, the husband of a dying friend, but he says they simply planned to keep their relationship a secret until after the friend's death. That's confirmed by another friend, so there's no reason to suspect him. All I see is every one of TTK's victims left their homes or hotels, and none of them came back. I was hoping you'd see what I'm missing."

Chaz watched Lau put on her most serene and Falkner-like face. Police departments--even the NYPD--called the FBI in to work miracles. You didn't want to shake their faith right out of the gate. "If you could look again at anyone, Vic, who would it be?"

"Thought you don't like speculation."

Brady said, "Not from the *Post*. Lead detective on the case gets special treatment."

Zhiang flipped open a folder, handed Lau two sheets of paper, and pointed at one. "This guy just icks me. Christopher Fung." Chaz craned his neck to see the photo: a young man with a hollow, sullen expression and a buzz cut, his head pushed forward on his heavy neck. "He did time for raping an Asian-American girl, got released, and two months later, young Asian-American

women were getting raped. Most years, there are very few reported rapes in this area. Last year, five from May to November, all similar. Maybe it's coincidence, but Fung's stories for those nights are weak--either he says he was home or at a club or can't remember."

Not quite one a month--Chaz craned to look at the file again--and not at regular intervals. TTK's schedule was similar, until the last three victims.

"DNA?" Lau asked.

"Fung was two days past his eighteenth birthday when he was arrested. The girl knew him by sight, identified him, and he pled guilty almost immediately. Somebody decided they didn't need to collect DNA."

Brady clicked his teeth together so firmly Chaz could hear it.

Chaz swallowed the last of his coffee. "The rapes stopped in November?"

Zhiang nodded. "Or his M.O. changed, or his hunting ground did. Or it wasn't Fung, and somebody killed the shithead and dumped him in the East River, which happens. Why?"

"TTK started a month later."

"You're connecting him through Amanda Jones? Do you know how many young Asian-American women live in New York City?"

Chaz opened his mouth. Brady said, "Smart money says he does." Chaz pretended there was still coffee in his cup and he'd opened his mouth to finish it.

Zhiang said, "Okay, the timing fits. But a change of M.O. like that--"

"Anomalous crimes, Detective," Todd said. "For what we hunt, a new M.O. might be irrelevant."

"Even with a change of target?"

"Sometimes they think they want one thing," Chaz said. "Then they decide on another."

Lau said, "Tell me about the unsolved rapes."

Zhiang closed his eyes, then opened them. "The women returned home at their usual times, close to midnight thanks to work or school. A man, Asian-American, maybe twenty-five or thirty, in a dark jacket with the hood up,

came from behind as they approached their door, put a knife to their back, and said he would kill them if they looked at his face or made trouble."

"But they identified him as Asian-American?"

"They were all sure. Though they said he talked like a gangbanger."

Chaz said, "Part of his disguise?"

Brady said, "And getting into character."

Lau asked, "Then he made them take him inside?"

"Yeah," Zhiang said. "Where he took his time. He never cut them, but he would stroke the blade on their skin to watch them cringe. If they had pubic hair, he would shave them. He told them to beg for their lives while he raped them. He made them wash after. He always took away his condoms." Zhiang exhaled as if the air conditioned room suddenly stank. "Need more? I can send the files."

Fear, Chaz thought. What if it wasn't about the rape so much as the fear? He looked out of the corner of his eye at Brady and Lau. They'd registered the same info.

Lau asked, "What did Christopher Fung do?"

"He raped a fourteen-year-old in her laundry room. So there's escalation, but it fits, far as I can tell. Lock them up, and some just come out smarter and meaner."

Lau frowned at the second sheet Zhiang had given her. "What about this?" Chaz couldn't quite read the typed statement from where he sat.

Zhiang said, "On the night Amanda Jones died, a drunk called 9-1-1 saying a cab nearly hit him, and he got the plate. But the leasing company says that cab never left the lot that night. So even if the drunk didn't imagine it, it's useless. Any or all of the numbers could be wrong."

Chaz said, "Hafidha could run the combinations. You never know."

Lau nodded. "Someone should see if Christopher Fung has an alibi for last night. Or any of the nights that TTK left a victim. Chaz, Todd, he's all yours. Brady and I can talk to the cab company."

Chaz thought, *If Fung is the best suspect, why wouldn't Lau-- Oh. Fung raped one Asian-American girl. Lau wants someone who won't assume he raped the others.*

That must be Todd.

*

Somewhere, sometime, darkness.

Tony D'Angelo heard the soft click of metal, then something so subtle he couldn't name it, another person's breathing, another person's heartbeat. Should he struggle? Playing dead made him think of being dead. What would help? He needed to pee. He needed someone to care.

As the gag was pulled free, he said, "Please. Whatever you want, I'll cooperate, honest."

"Yeah, Anthony. Fact, that." A man's voice. Tenor. New Yorker. No one Tony had ever heard.

He called him Anthony. The man didn't know who he was. Was that good? In the army, they'd said if you were captured, make your captor see you as a person, not a target. Was there a difference between an enemy soldier and whoever this was?

He said tentatively, "Tony. Everybody calls me Tony. My wife, my daughters, my friends, everybody."

"Sure thing. I'll call you Tony-o. You call me Mr. Black."

He's playing with me. Does his game have rules? Can we both win? Tony said, "What do you want? Uh, from me? Mr. Black?"

"Answer me a question is all."

Tony nodded. When he heard nothing, he said, "I will, Mr. Black."

"What terrifies you most? What's the nightmare so bad you can't sleep for hours afterward? What's piss-yourself and pray-to-die scary?"

Should he play tough? That would only make the man want to weaken him. Make him think he's in control, and maybe he'll slip up. "This. Totally. My wife says I 'm a baby about being helpless--"

"No, no, Tony-o. Leave your wife out of this. It's just you and me. And you think this is scary, which I like, Tony-o. But we haven't even begun to begin. So. What scares you so much you can't tell anyone?"

Vampires, Tony thought. *Falling*. He felt like he was on speed, bad speed, way too much speed cut with something evil. *Slow, painful death. Who's not afraid of slow, painful death?* He said, "All kinds of things scare me, Mr. Black. My girls say I'm a total fraidy-cat. We don't have much money, but it's yours. We've got friends. We can get you money. No one has to know. Please, just tell me--"

Soft hands touched his cheeks, like someone planning to kiss him. Tony jerked in surprise, but the cloth bonds kept him from doing more than rocking back. What did this man want? Everyone wanted something. If he could just figure out what the guy wanted, he could get him to stop scaring him.

"Eyes," the man said as if savoring the word.

Tony winced as the blindfold was jerked from his head. Mr. Black was slender, Asian, grinning hard, with hair so short it might have been shaved a week or two before. He wore a black T-shirt, black jeans, black running shoes.

A single bare bulb burned overhead, a compact fluorescent. The room had no windows. The floor was concrete with rust-colored stains near the old futon Tony lay on. The walls were thick blue insulation panels. The door was another blue panel, cut to fit into a three-by-six door frame.

Movie posters had been taped to the walls. Without his glasses, Tony couldn't read all of them, but he saw enough to guess what sort the rest must be: *Taxi Driver. Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Saw. Psycho. The Shining. Les Diaboliques.*

Eyes? If Mr. Black didn't know him, he couldn't have read the interview where Tony had said no matter how painless, cheap, or fast it was, he could never get Lasik.

Mr. Black said, "Ever see *An Andalusian Dog*, Tony-o?"

Was that a band? A show? Why was a madman asking-- *The razor slicing an eye movie.* Tony winced and shook his head.

"No, I didn't think so. It's not the kind of film just anyone would see." Mr. Black turned and went to the door.

Tony called, "Please! Whatever you want--"

"I'll get. Don't worry. I'm going to make something special for you now."

Food? He wasn't hungry. If the man brought food, would he dare eat it? When Mr. Black opened the door, Tony could see a long, narrow room beyond it, and part of what might be a sink, and beyond that a large, dark room with rectangle shapes stacked on a table.

Keep him from talking about eyes. Don't ask about my glasses. Tony said, "Can I--know something? Why me?"

"Good question, Tony-o. You ask God that?"

Tony nodded. "Sometimes. I'm more spiritual than religious, but we take the girls to church, and I pray."

"Then be happy, Tony-o. I'm God's answer."

The door closed. A moment later, the light went out. In the darkness, Tony's heart played the bass part to, *Please god save me, please god save me, please god save—*

Act III

New York City, NY, 8:15 AM

As Chaz drove the congested streets of Chinatown, terrifying drivers in yellow cabs, white and blue buses, battered delivery trucks, and gleaming vanity cars, he told Todd, "I've got a theory."

Todd resisted the temptation to grab for the dashboard for the half-dozenth time. "That it's good to die like James Dean?"

Chaz grinned. "We can't get up sufficient velocity here. Besides, don't take anyone with you. Matter of principle."

"Ah, Grasshopper, it is good to have theories. That's my theory. What's yours?"

"Power corrupts."

"Pithy. I like it. Better hope Lord Acton doesn't steal it from you."

"I think it's the difference between gammas and betas. Gammas want power."

Todd snuck a look at Chaz's profile--which was, just then, in profile, thank God, since one ought to be looking out the windshield when a produce van was backing out of a blind alley in front of one's car. Usually he liked to let someone else drive. He could let his mind do as it pleased that way. With Chaz driving, his mind mostly wanted to scream *We're going to die!* "You don't want power?"

Chaz rolled his head and his eyes at Todd, and Todd pretended he wasn't holding his breath. "Yeah, right. Emperor Norton, maybe."

"Should I say something about protesting too much?"

"I don't mean I want to be powerless." He shrugged one of his odd many-jointed shrugs. "Just...free to do what I want."

"And who has that much power?"

Chaz's flat-lipped grin was one of the ones that didn't really mean *grin*. "Fuck. It was a good theory, though."

Todd studied his flattened mouth, the tightness in his bony jaw and shoulders. "This is about Hafidha going off the grid?"

A puff of exhale. *Yes, child, Uncle Duke is a profiler, too.*

"Uh. Yeah."

Todd nodded. "There's power she loves. Power to delight. Power to surprise. Power to help. You want my theory on gammas and betas?"

"Is it a Duke theory or a Sol theory?"

"Is there a difference?"

Chaz grinned. "A Sol theory's a koan. A Duke theory's a very long-haired dog."

Todd shook his head. "I thought I was the one who did too many drugs in his youth."

"I'm listening, I'm listening."

"You are too kind, Grasshopper. My theory is gammas are control freaks. The world terrifies them, so they impose their myths. Betas like live-and-let-live."

"That's it?"

"In the next draft, I'll add something about fluoridation and Latin mottos on our money."

Chaz laughed and dodged a bicycle messenger. Todd was grateful for both. "So we mostly find gammas because most people are control freaks? Duke, in the language of your tribe, that theory's a major bummer."

"Grasshopper, you miss an implication. We could be surrounded by betas, and we wouldn't know it because they're all living-and-let-living."

"Oh. That's a sweet theory."

Todd nodded. "Yes. It is. But not so sweet you shouldn't watch the road."

Chaz slammed the brakes to keep from rear-ending a taxi cutting in front of him. Todd rocked against his seat belt, then said, "Or we could be surrounded by gammas just waiting to pounce."

*

Christopher Fung's address was a door half-hidden between a video store and a fish market. Chaz parked in the alley three storefronts down, and they walked past a window full of posters for new Hong Kong movies, and CDs either by or about beautiful Asian women. Todd couldn't remember enough Chinese to tell which.

"Lau screwed up," he said.

Chaz blinked at him. "She never screws up."

"Who's going to be the bad cop?"

Chaz jerked to a stop. "Damn. She should've sent you and Brady."

"Not you and Brady?"

Chaz's mouth twisted; he looked sidelong at Todd, as if he'd just had a moment of self-knowledge that he felt he should have had long ago. Which, Todd, suspected, was true. Chaz said, as if Todd might have forgotten, "Fung's a rapist."

Todd nodded. "She didn't screw up. You'll make a fine bad cop."

Six buzzers, all with names beside them. Two of them were in both English and Chinese characters, including Fung's. He pressed the buzzer, then looked up at the camera mounted above the security door.

A woman's voice said, "Yes?"

They held up their badges. Chaz said, "FBI. We're here to see Christopher Fung."

"FBI? Why?"

"We'd rather discuss that with Mr. Fung."

"I come down."

A moment later, a stout young Asian woman in red capris and a Hello Kitty T-shirt opened the door, saying, "What you want? Chris sleeping now."

Chaz glanced at Todd, then said, "He was out last night? Do you know where--"

"He not go out! My son sick! Crying all night with sore throat. Chris sit up with him so I sleep. I got work. What kinda shit this, you make trouble for us?"

Chaz said, "You're-- Are you married to Mr. Fung?"

"FBI business, people get married? Green card? Yeah, we married."

"Mrs. Fung," Todd said, doing his best to sound meek and mild. "We do need to talk to your husband."

Mrs. Fung said something in Chinese that was probably not polite, and headed back up the stairs. She let them catch the door and follow her as they could.

The apartments were arranged three to a floor, with the hallway down one side. The front doors of all the apartments were open, because the three tiny windows in the hallway opened into the air shaft between the buildings. If anyone wanted cross-ventilation in the July heat, they would have to give up privacy. Conversations in English and Chinese and Hmong came out each door and scrambled in the hall.

Christopher Fung was asleep on the sleeper sofa in the tiny living room. Beyond him was a curtained doorway, the fabric drawn closed. Chaz shifted nervously from foot to foot. Todd made sure his weapon was accessible, though he was increasingly certain he wouldn't need it.

Mrs. Fung leaned over her husband. "Chris," she murmured. "You wake up. Wake up now. Police come again."

Fung frowned, knuckled his eyes, sat up. He'd been sleeping on top of the covers in a t-shirt and warm-up pants. Given that his bedroom was the front room of an apartment with the hall door standing open, Todd thought that was a good idea.

Fung weighed more than he had in his mug shot. Chaz sent Todd a quick, blank-faced look before he said, "Mr. Fung, we're agents Villette and Todd with the FBI. We need to ask about--we need to know where you were last night."

"FBI?" Fung repeated. His mouth hung open.

"Mr. Fung, a man was murdered last night--"

Fung stared.

Chaz's hands rose just enough for Todd to wonder what he could possibly want to do with them. Then they dropped. "The murder may be connected to a series of rapes that occurred in the second half of last year."

"Oh, Jesus," Fung said. He folded forward over his knees, laced his fingers together hard, and muttered, "Please make this go away."

Mrs. Fung crouched beside him and put her arms around his shoulders.

"Where were you last night?" Chaz asked again, but not like a stern agent of justice.

Fung drew a long, shaking breath. "Every time something bad happens, the cops come ask me where I was." He spoke softly, softer than the clamor of the neighbors along the hall. "I was here all last night. My boy's sick. I hurt that girl that once. But I was a kid. I'm sorry now."

"It was a lot more than hurt," Chaz said, "and eighteen isn't a kid." Todd didn't think the Fungs would notice the little vibrating edge in Chaz's voice.

Fung clutched at his face, dragged his fingers down it. "I know. I been sorry ever since. I asked Jesus's help in prison. I'm sorry for what I did."

Mrs. Fung glared up at Chaz, but tears ran down her face. "Every day, he pray for poor girl, that Jesus take away hurt."

"And that's good enough for you?"

"No! Never good enough!" She kept her voice low. The child's bed would be behind the curtain. "But he work hard for me, my son, give to church, work with boys who make mistakes. You believe in, in redemption? Believe in Jesus? Believe in Buddha? Believe you can do bad, and learn, and do good?"

"Uh, I...don't--" Chaz looked at Todd.

"Yes, ma'am," Todd said softly. "I do."

Chaz watched him out the corner of his eye, like a nervous horse.

"Then you leave us alone?"

Todd said, "When were you married?"

Fung answered him. "February. Why?"

"You've lived here since then?"

Mrs. Fung nodded, frowning, maybe trying to figure out what she'd just committed herself to.

"Mr. Fung, did you leave the apartment at all last night?"

"I told you. No. Joey's sick." He said it with a jerk of his head toward the curtained doorway.

"Mrs. Fung, are you sure your husband was here all night?"

"I wake up, go look on my son. One time, Chris read to him. One time, he give him water. Two times, he sleep in chair by his bed. He no sneak out."

Todd nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Fung. Mrs. Fung. I apologize for the inconvenience."

He headed for the front door, and felt Chaz close behind him.

"Definitely not a gamma," Chaz muttered.

"And not TTK. His wife woke up four times. She's a light sleeper. He'd have to get past her on the couch to leave the apartment...and past the neighbors. And TTK has to have a torture room with easy access. The Fungs..."

"Yeah," said Chaz. He paused at the top of the stairs, head cocked. "You believe in God?"

"I believe in redemption. On even-numbered days, at least."

Chaz's mouth worked, but whatever the argument was, he decided against it. They jogged down the stairs in silence.

When they reached the street, Chaz said, "I am the worst bad cop. Ever."

Todd nodded. "One of the reasons we like you, Grasshopper."

"Doesn't that mean we shouldn't like Brady?"

Todd shrugged. "Danny Brady needs to be Danny Brady."

*

8:30 AM

The first-shift lead dispatcher leaned across the counter in the office of the Siung Taxi Company. She was a small, white-haired woman; light glinted off her Star of David earrings as she looked from Lau's Bureau ID to Brady's. "Aren't you supposed to have a warrant or something?"

Brady said, "Only if you're not feeling helpful."

Lau kept her face professional and emotionless. Inwardly she was grinning. Brady had a way of saying those things in an innocuous voice that made them hit a second later and an order of magnitude harder than any tough-guy affect would manage.

The dispatcher eyed him warily. Then she gestured around the small, crowded office where a handful of dispatchers spoke on phones in at least four languages. "I am busy."

Lau said, "We're patient. Famous for it."

Brady added, "If someone did drive that taxi off the lot that night, he or she saw something that might help us catch a serial killer."

The dispatcher touched her earring, bit her lip, then said, "I'd like to help, honest. But the cab with that license did not leave the lot. The office is open twenty-four-seven. The night guys on the gate have been with us for years. I trust them better than I trust myself. The only cabs that went out are on file."

Lau said, "Could someone alter the records?"

The dispatcher laughed. "Sure. But a hacker could make a lot more money working someplace else."

Lau thought, *Hafs can check the files.* Then she admired the ease of Brady's Texas smile as he said, "Ma'am, we'd surely be grateful if we could double-check with whoever was in charge that night."

The dispatcher shrugged and tapped her keyboard. "December-- Ah. Figures. Jason Saito."

Brady and Lau glanced at each other. Lau said, "Figures?"

"He was on drugs. His work never really suffered, not so there was a reason to let him go, but he just started acting crazy, you know? It was heroin, you could tell."

The woman at the desk behind her snorted.

"What do you know?" the dispatcher snarled. "It was."

"Crystal meth. They lose weight like *that*." The woman at the desk snapped her fingers.

Brady raised his chin. "A lot of weight?"

"Like in *Schindler's List*." The dispatcher shook her head. "Drugs'll do that."

Lau said, "Did something happen that would've hit him hard?"

"He said his wife left him."

"When was that?" Brady asked.

"Right when he started." The dispatcher glanced at her screen again. "May of last year. Why anybody would marry a guy like that..."

"When do you expect him in?"

"He quit a month ago. But we've got a home address--"

Act IV

8:45 AM

Saito's address was an old tan brick four-story warehouse, the smallest on a street of factories and warehouses. A sign at the front gave a number to call, because the building would soon be converted to "affordable luxury lofts."

A yellow cab was parked in front. As they headed toward the front door, Lau frowned at it. *What's wrong with this picture?*

Brady glanced back. "What?"

"Can't fool an Angelina about body work. That's an amateur spray job. And the lettering--"

"Saving a buck is good American business."

"Tinted windows." Lau cupped her hands to peer into the back of the cab. "Lock buttons are gone. Pull the door shut, and you're locked in."

She thumbed in Todd's number. When he answered, she said, "We're at Jason Saito's. How quickly can you get here?"

"With Chaz driving?" Todd replied. "Under ten minutes."

"Has anyone heard from Tony D'Angelo?"

"Not a word. His wife's frantic."

"Call Vic. Tell him to get down here, and bring the big boys. And don't wait for him." Lau disconnected.

Brady scowled at the taxi. "Bastard didn't sneak a cab out. He snuck the plates out in case a cop ran the number." He bounded for the entrance, taking the four steps in a single leap, and tried the latch.

There were five labeled buzzers on a box between the door and a narrow frosted window. One per floor, and one for the basement. The top four displayed names of companies, faded typewriter ink on yellowed paper. The bottom one was hand-lettered, still white: "J. Saito."

Lau jabbed each of the top four buttons once. If the commercial tenants were gone, there were no bystanders to warn. She listened to the rumbling of

Manhattan in the silence that followed, breathed in the odor of trash and diesel fumes. If nothing came up this weekend, she was going to hike someplace where the air smelled like pine sap.

"No one home." Brady stepped back, staring at the steel door, then at the window beside it.

"We should wait for backup."

"D'Angelo has a wife and two daughters."

Lau sighed. The contractor had begun to gut the old offices; a corroded sink drain pipe lay in a heap of crumbled wallboard beside the dumpster. She picked it up, judged its weight.

"Someone broke in. We should notify a tenant." She swung the pipe. The frosted glass of the window splintered.

Too loud! She knocked shards out of the frame, reached through the hole to push the panic bar. Adrenaline, triggered by noise and her own hunting instinct, said *hurryhurryhurry*. She knew better. But her breath still came quick and shallow, her heart still pounded.

Brady caught the door in his left hand as he drew his weapon with his right. Lau drew hers, held it low to the right in both hands. She caught the door with her hip as she followed Brady in.

The cowboy's taking point. Because no one's likely to come from behind here? Or so he gets first shot at it? Or so it gets first shot at him? She followed, promising that if somehow Saito got the first shot, he wouldn't get a second.

Interior walls stood at random in the first floor: the remains of offices, part of the hall. As perfect an ambush scenario as the ones built for agent training at Quantico. But no one died in those. And the hostage at the end of the course wasn't real.

Brady ahead of her, bent-kneed, springy, prowling. An ethical tiger. Was his heart racing? She couldn't tell by looking. He couldn't see hers, either. Unless she told him, he couldn't know if she was afraid. She moved up to cover his left side.

Paint silhouettes showed where cupboards and fittings had been pulled out. leaving ghosts behind like Hiroshima's shadowed dead. Demolition rubble lay in drifts. Sawdust and gypsum powdered every flat surface. She worked her way over the irregular flooring--old wide-board pine, newer plywood underlayment, bits of industrial carpet.

The elevator doors were boarded over. Beside them the stairwell to the basement gaped, its fire door missing. The dust on the top step showed shoe prints. Sneakers, the same pattern over and over in both directions.

Brady saw them, too, pointed with his chin. She nodded. He started down the stairs, hugging the wall, and she followed.

The stairs were quiet. How much did a New York taxi medallion cost? Maybe they were going to wake some poor bastard who had just finished a late shift in an illegal cab, and Reyes would be pissed.

No. The cab was a murdermobile. They'd followed a good trail. Saito was at the end of it.

And someday someone was going to die who would've lived if they'd shown up two minutes earlier. Not today. Not here.

She grew calmer with each step. She thought, *Be vewy quiet. We're hunting wabbits*. It was the secret mantra she couldn't tell Brady, because he would think she wasn't taking this seriously. But she was taking it extremely seriously: In the cartoon, the wabbit always won.

They took position on either side of the wooden door at the bottom of the stairs, backs to the wall. Brady was on the knob side. He reached one-handed, turned it, but the door didn't open. He looked across to Lau and asked the question with his eyebrows. She nodded.

In one smooth motion, Brady stepped in front of the door and kicked. Splinters flipped across the room from the broken frame.

Movement. They leveled their weapons--not fast enough for the gray cat that bolted off the cot and behind a workbench. Lau's lungs and heart pumped in a frenzy.

Saito's room was about thirty feet wide and twenty feet long, lit by fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. Half was living space: a cot with a sleeping bag against one wall, a microwave and an electric grill on a table over a mini

fridge, a TV, a laptop computer, a rolling clothes rack with dark men's clothes carefully grouped so shirts and trousers and jackets hung together.

The other side of the room was a hobbyist's workshop: two big tables, racks of hand tools, lumber and pipes and electrical wire, everything needed to work with wood or metal or electricity. Innocent things, in innocent hands.

By the door stood a black leather carryon bag and a hardshell guitar case labeled "Tony D'Angelo, Fingers of Fury."

The near walls were brick, covered with fading yellow paint. The far wall was new dark wood paneling. An open door near the outside wall revealed a long, narrow washroom.

Again they flanked the door. Brady slipped the long-handled mirror out of his breast pocket, extended it with a snap of one hand, and poked it into the room. He looked across at Lau and shook his head. She went in crouched and ready, anyway.

Two of the washroom walls were brick. The third was new wood paneling. The new wall had no doors. An empty unpainted pine shelf unit stood against it, close to the middle.

Lau concentrated on breathing deep and slow. *Maybe it's nothing. If it's what it looks like, maybe no one's inside.* She hated the rest of the logical thought: *Maybe no one inside is alive*.

Brady crossed the room. Lau nodded, covered him with her weapon. He tugged on the shelf.

It swung out silently.

She smelled sweat and urine. She saw thick blue insulating foam on the inside of the shelf and on the walls of the inner room. She saw Tony D'Angelo strapped in a home-made padded chair with a high back, like a replica of an electric chair. Instead of leather bonds, silk straps crossed his chest, arms, legs, and forehead, holding him still. A gag in his mouth kept him quiet.

The man standing over D'Angelo had to be Jason Saito. His baggy clothes and taut features said he might be a gamma. For an instant, Lau thought Saito was holding up a viewing device like a stereoscope or a kinetoscope

for D'Angelo. Brackets extended from the chair past either side of D'Angelo's head, and the device rested across them.

The device was a piece of wood with two long spikes extending from it, a finger's length apart. Saito's hands lay on it. A shift in his balance would push the spikes into D'Angelo's eyes.

Brady shouted, "FBI! Back away from him!"

D'Angelo whimpered through his gag. Saito glanced at Lau and Brady, frowned, then shook his head, "Do one damn thing, I fall forward, and Tony-o dies. Want to see?" He moved the spikes closer to D'Angelo's eyes.

Brady said, "Stop. It's over."

"Guess so." Saito twitched the spikes forward half an inch.

"No!" Lau yelled. Saito needed an excuse to prolong this. But she couldn't think of one to give him.

"Oh, pretty," Saito breathed, looking Lau up and down. "Bet I could make you cry, pretty girl."

She studied Saito past her front sight and realized if it weren't for D'Angelo, she'd laugh. All her fear was for the man in the chair.

Brady said, "Where's the fear if you kill him, Jason?"

Saito said cooly, "In you."

"Sure. The more witnesses, the merrier, huh?"

Saito squinted at Brady, then nodded. "Get me Fox News. Get some snipers, too. See if I fall backward or if--" Saito smiled. "--it's bye-bye, Tony-o." His tongue worked a little between his lips. It looked unconscious. She could hear D'Angelo panting through his nose.

Brady lowered his weapon. That was all right; Lau had the shot if it came to it. "When did you figure out it was the fear that got you off, Jason?" Brady asked. "It does, right? It's not what you do to them. It's what they do to you."

Saito's hands lay across the spiked board, but his eyes were on Brady.

Brady continued, "What the hell are you supposed to do, when they make you feel that way? Just dressing in black, standing a little too close on the

subway--that's all it takes to get 'em going. Then what do they expect you to do?"

"Yeah, Mr. FBI. Like you've been there." But Saito doubted.

"My name's Brady. But Mr. FBI works, too. How do you do it, Jason? You know what scares 'em. How?"

Saito smiled. "I read minds."

"Then you know about Dallas."

Saito looked from D'Angelo to Brady, brows drawn down over his nose. Lau just managed not to do something similar. *What about Dallas?*

"I know what I need to know," Saito said. Not quite as cocky now.

Brady nodded. "Figured that. Were you going to rape Amanda Jones, only you found drowning scared her more? Was that when you knew you were different?"

"What do you know about it?"

"But you raped Rodney Johnson. Why? You don't like men, so I'm guessing his fear--"

"What about Dallas?"

"We want to know all about it, man. You're *special*. Could you tell you had a good one, as soon as they got in the cab? Or even before--don't want to waste your time picking up a lame one."

"Tell me about Dallas!" Saito nearly screamed it. "Tell me about Dallas, or I kill Tony-o." D'Angelo whined in terror through the gag.

"Nah. Then my partner goes John Woo on your ass, and where's the fun? Let's make a deal."

"No way, Mr. FBI."

Brady shifted his pistol to his left hand and held it toward Lau.

She kept her isosceles stance and shook her head.

He shrugged and tucked it in her jacket pocket. She thought, *Brady, this better not be some kind of cowboy scheme.* But a cowboy scheme would be

shooting Saito and taking the chance that D'Angelo might live. That's what she should do. Reyes would understand. Reyes would expect it.

But Brady knew that.

Saito said, "What are you doing, Mr. FBI?"

Lau said, "Brady. We can wait for backup."

"Jason can't wait. He's hot. He needs his fix." Brady took a step toward Saito. "Everyone's got a thing. I get that. Come on, let's deal. Dallas is tasty. And it's not a what-if, Jason. It's real life."

"You're crazy, man."

"Going on seven years now. If you really don't care, my partner might as well drop you. Your call."

Saito bit his lower lip, then said, "I can spot a lie."

"Yeah? Say I'm lying, and I'll know you're bullshitting."

Saito's gaze flicked around the room. Lau wondered if she should pray Chaz, Todd, and Zhiang came quickly or gave them more time. What would Reyes do? Her pistol weighed heavier with every moment. Would D'Angelo's death be too much to pay for getting Saito off the planet?

Yes. It was harder to be the good guys.

"Back off, let D'Angelo go. You come with us," Brady said. "Comfortable room, plenty of exercise, good food, cable TV."

"HBO?"

Brady whuffed, bitter amusement. "Give up, and I give you Dallas."

"How do I know it's worth it?"

Brady took another step toward Saito. Lau couldn't see his face. She'd never heard the note that was in his voice when he said, "Oh, I bet you can tell."

Saito's mouth worked; his chest rose and fell. "Once isn't enough. That place? You come visit me. Once a week."

"Once a month."

"No!"

"You want to wear out the batteries? It's called desensitization. You don't want that."

Stall him, Brady. Any minute, through that door... Though she was damned if she knew how that would help.

"You promise?"

Lau watched Brady's back muscles stretch with a breath. "I promise."

Saito said, "Put out your hand."

Gamma, gamma, gamma. Anything could happen. "No!" she cried. "Danny--"

Brady said, "Jason and I, we've got an understanding." He stretched out his arm.

Saito clutched the board that threatened D'Angelo with one hand. He reached out the other and touched Brady's fingers.

Saito's indrawn breath scraped audibly in his throat. His eyes squeezed shut. Then he smiled. "Oh, yeah." Slowly he stepped back from D'Angelo, pulling the board off the brackets. D'Angelo sagged in his bonds.

"Put it on the ground, and kick it into the corner," Lau ordered him.

He did, without once taking his eyes off Brady. He was still smiling.

Lau thought, *What the hell did I just see?*

Saito turned his horrible smile on her. "Some thoughts I can hear without touching. He'll die before he tells you."

Act V

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C., 2:55 PM

From the door of her office, Falkner watched Brady stalk through the bullpen and drop his go bag on his desk. He never slouched; if there was one thing an officer left the army with, it was posture. But the elastic confident body language she'd thought was hardwired in Brady wasn't there. *He'll walk like that when he's fifty*, she thought.

He'd done something so crazy it was worthy of Chaz, and gotten away with it. He'd get a dressing-down, of course, but he'd have known that going in. He must have thought it was the right thing to do, because he'd done it.

So why was he wary?

Reyes intercepted him as he turned toward the kitchenette. "You don't have to tell me what you were thinking, because I do not care. Never pull a stupid fucking stunt like that again." Which, Falkner thought, might be the first time she had heard Reyes drop the F-bomb.

Brady said, "Eddie Cieslewicz cut off his hand."

"You thought Saito might have a little conscience?"

Brady shook his head. "No."

"Then?"

"I'll start my report."

"Brady--"

"Or could be it's time I quit."

Reyes exhaled. It was like two samurai, Falkner thought, each waiting for the other's move. "Write fast."

*

6:35 PM

Falkner set Brady's report down. *It's got the who, what, when, and where. Does he think we'll fill in the why?* She rubbed her burning eyes. Then she put on her jacket, picked up her briefcase, turned off her office light, and stepped outside.

Brady leaned against the wall, arms folded across his chest, head down, eyes closed. He wouldn't have slept since--when? If he'd been lying down, she could have put his jacket over him, turned out the hall lights, and told the cleaning crew not to disturb him.

He said, "Just resting my eyes," and straightened up. "You read it?"

She thought, *Like you believed I might not have.* "Yes."

"Is it a good enough answer for Reyes?"

"Depends. Do you want to see Saito once a month?"

"No, ma'am. But I gave him my word."

"Then you might have a problem."

"He'll want to know what Saito's getting."

Thinking, *We all will,* she nodded. "Secrets are things the other guy can use. It's like those British espionage scandals." She considered her options. "And 'Don't ask, don't tell.'"

Brady glanced at her. "You know I'm gay."

"You know I'm a profiler."

He smiled slightly, just the tiniest quirk at the corner of his lips. "Yes, ma'am."

"It's not about you being gay." When he frowned, she added, "Is it?"

"It's about Andre Kent."

She realized he wasn't the only one who was tired. The name sounded familiar, and it was a name Brady knew, so it had something to do with-- "Your friend. And your first contact--"

*

Dallas, TX, February 22, 2001

He burst into a bedroom he knew better than his own and that he did not know at all: A silver plastic tarp covered the mattress. Andre, in workout pants and a T-shirt printed with Elvis Presley's face and the words, "LET ME BE YOUR TEDDY BEAR," leaned over a tanned young man in jeans. The man, naked from the waist up, writhed on the tarp, spread-eagled, supine, tied to the bed posts and gagged with a bandanna that looked like the Texas flag.

Brady thought in relief, *Andre's fine. It's some kind of game. It's--*

Andre was cutting the young man's chest.

No. Andre was stroking his left index finger along the man's chest. The skin was parting as if he held a knife.

Andre looked up, startled and embarrassed. "Danny. You said--" He looked back at the young man. "This isn't what it looks like."

The man raised his head, saw Brady, and gave a breathy, wordless screech through his gag.

"Andre--"

"I'll fix it. See?" Andre smoothed his hand over the cut, and skin came together, leaving a pink line in the tan. The blood smeared on the man's torso, on Andre's fingertips. "It's fine."

"No."

Andre nodded quickly. "You're right. It's--it's not. This is Phil Tobin. You remember?"

Brady nodded. Tobin. Believed to have led a gay-bashing spree that ended with a sixteen-year-old boy dying of exposure in the woods. His mother hired the best lawyer in the city, and the jury agreed it was just a case of boys being boys.

Andre swept his hand again. Tobin's chest parted from navel to sternum. Tobin arched, screamed past the gag. Andre glared down at him, and said in his passionate, courtroom voice, "See! That's pain!"

Brady was aiming his Smith & Wesson at Andre. When had he drawn it? When had he dropped the grocery sack? He said, "Andre--"

Andre looked up. His eyes in candlelight were golden, but they were only brown now. His chin lifted. When he admitted he was at fault, he always did it looking his accuser in the eye. "You're right, Danny. He's scum. That doesn't mean I should be. I believe in justice." He passed his hand down Tobin's torso again. Tobin sobbed, terror and relief mixed.

"It's over now," Andre said gently. Then he flicked his index finger across Tobin's throat. Brady heard the bubbling breath as the neck opened, cut almost to the spine.

Andre's face was a parody of mercy as he stroked his fingers back across Tobin's neck. Tobin's throat healed, but Tobin only twitched twice and lay still. His chest did not move.

Andre said, "Don't look at me like that, Danny. Please. Everyone makes mistakes."

Brady said, "Stay where you are." He could barely speak above a whisper. Charlie Daniels might have drowned him out.

Andre stepped toward him, reaching out with his left hand, the hand that had cut Tobin. The blood on it was wet and bright as fresh paint. Maybe it was paint. Andre surprising Brady with a practical joke. The worst sort imaginable for a cop.

Andre hated practical jokes.

"It doesn't mean a thing, Danny. It doesn't change what we have."

What he had with Andre. This was someone--something--else.

Maybe he felt the skin of his chest begin to part. Maybe he only imagined it. His Smith & Wesson fired. That's what you do when threatened with deadly force. Don't mess around with warning shots or wounding shots. Shoot for the heart.

Andre jerked slightly, then looked down, surprised. Blood spread onto his t-shirt from a small hole in his sternum. Blood was sprayed behind him on the tan carpet they'd picked out together six weeks ago and on the turquoise wall that was Brady's favorite color.

Brady felt his skin prickling all over as if fireants were nibbling at him. Or that's what he thought he had felt afterward.

A bleeding hole appeared above Andre's golden-brown eyes. Blood spattered the painting Brady had given Andre for his birthday: two stylized horses, one red, one white, ran through the greens and grays and golds of the Texas plains under a fragile blue sky.

The prickling became burning. Andre stepped again, reaching toward Brady with his left arm, lips twitching.

Heart shot doesn't stop him. Head shot doesn't. What will?

The third shot went through Andre's left shoulder. That arm fell limp, but the right rose, then fell with the sound of a fourth shot.

Brady stepped back, pistol still before him in both hands. Andre lurched closer, or maybe he was falling, but what should you do when something impossible is coming for you, maybe to kill you, maybe to hold you while it died?

The fifth shot went through Andre's right knee. Air passed from his lungs, or maybe he said "Danny." He fell sideways, convulsing as if electrocuted.

Brady fired again and again. He didn't know he was counting bullets until he came to the last and thought, *I could save that one for me.*

He fired it into Andre's heart, and everything he loved was finally dead.

He dropped the magazine from his pistol, yanked out the spare, slammed it home, and aimed downward. Andre lay still. Blood pooled out from his body. Five quarts in a human being. How many quarts of blood in someone you love? Nine? Ten? The carpet wicked it toward him. It was almost under the pointed toes of his boots before he stepped back.

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D. C., July 18, 2007

Brady looked away, into the half-lit bullpen. For an instant, Falkner wondered if that was as much as he could bring himself to say. But he shook his head and turned back. "I said friend when I wrote it up. It wasn't a lie. Just wasn't the truth."

Falkner stood beside him, remembering one of Todd's mantras. *Breathe in, breathe out, move on*. You had to remember to take the time to breathe before you moved.

Brady added, "Still can't figure what triggered Andre. He'd lost a little weight-- But he was always trying to lose a little. I tell myself it was a case he lost around then, but--"

"You can't know."

"I tell myself that, too."

She nodded. "You'll share that with Saito?"

He shrugged. "Already did."

"You'll keep sharing it with Saito?"

"I said I'd go to Arkham every month. So every month, I will. But he may not like it." Brady closed his mouth tight, as if keeping back some strong emotion, but she couldn't tell which one. "I think I just killed the taste of it for him."

"Because you told it to me."

Brady nodded.

"And you'll tell the others?"

"Yeah." He didn't slouch, but he had a way of setting his shoulders that said, *Done now.*

"Brady?"

He turned his head, and she thought, *Convictions, principles, drive. A yearning toward justice. A determination to be of use. Where would he be if Andre hadn't gone gamma?* She said, "Buy you a beer?"

"I'll be fine."

"I know that."

"And you don't get enough time with your family."

She set her hand on Brady's arm, as lightly and as firmly as she would have set it on the arm of anyone she loved. "That's why I'm offering."

"Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is." -- German Proverb

Sweetheart

Dallas, TX, January 2001

That Tuesday, Brady didn't get off work until almost eight. When he let himself into Andre's condo, he found it full of the scent of minestrone. From the living room speakers, They Might Be Giants murmured something about thinking and not thinking.

As he closed and locked the door behind him, Andre emerged from the kitchen, barefoot, wearing his ratty jeans and with his dress shirt untucked.

"Have I ever told you how much you look like Steve Dallas when you do that?"

Andre raised his eyebrows. "Is that a complaint or a new kink I should know about? Also, what happened to, 'hi, sweetheart, how was your day?'"

Brady hadn't smiled since sometime around ten o'clock that morning, and god, it felt like his face cracking apart. "Andre, what would you do to me if I called you 'sweetheart'?"

"Feed you your nuts with a club soda chaser," Andre said without missing a beat.

"And *that* would be what happened to 'hi, sweetheart, how was your day.'"

Andre's eyes softened as he let the banter die. "Bad one?"

"Yeah," Brady said, as lightly as he could. He didn't want to dwell on what it was like to start the day with two bodies in a basement apartment, killed with a shotgun, and spend the rest of it traveling backward through their lives: despair, poverty, diagnosed inoperable tumor, fights, behavior changes, nine happily married years, met on a blind date. Rewind from ruin to happiness to be able to say, yes, it was definitely murder/suicide. Cause of death: failure to cope. So he just said, "Pretty bad."

"Well, you lose the hardware, and I'll pour you something alcoholic, and we can..." He considered Brady thoughtfully. "We can talk about something completely different until you stop trying to crack your molars there, cowboy."

"Shit," Brady said.

"Busted," Andre said. "Hurry up, I want to get you drunk." He went back into the kitchen and Brady proceeded down the hall to lock the Smith & Wesson in its gunsafe-away-from-home.

The Sociopath in the Street

Johns Hopkins Medical Center, Baltimore, MD, April, 2005

The room was cold as a skating rink, and smelled faintly of alcohol and corruption. *Sounds like the title of a Tennessee Williams play,* Daniel Brady thought. *Or the plot summary, anyway.*

Madeline Frost was doing something to *something* on the examining table, with what looked like bolt cutters. Her latex-gloved hands seemed too small and soft and plump to squeeze the handles, but intermittent cracking sounds suggested otherwise. The gray in Frost's razored pixie cut showed fluorescent-white in the hard, clear lights.

Brady had as strong a stomach as any, and stronger than most, but he didn't angle for a better view of the table. "Hey, Frost, if you were going to murder active, white, middle-class men between the ages of 20 and 35, how would--"

"Why would I do that?" Frost didn't turn from her work.

"Well, you wouldn't, obviously, but if you did--"

"But I don't."

Brady sighed. "Bear with me here for a moment, would you? I need the opinion of the Sociopath in the Street."

She turned at last and stared into his face, as if wondering how hard it would be to remove it intact. Then she nodded. "Okay. Shoot."

Caterpillar

Resada, CA, April, 1986
Nikki Lau took her first dare when she was seven years old.

At recess one bright spring morning, Benjy Hoffman dared her to eat a caterpillar.

She did.

shadow unit

1.05 "Ballistic" - by Sarah Monette, Emma Bull, Elizabeth Bear & Amanda Downum

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

You aren't supposed to be in Grandma's room when she isn't there. It's dark inside, the heavy curtains drawn tight, and the air smells of camphor and lavender potpourri and furniture polish. Your stomach feels too small as you peer through the cracked-open door, like it did when Tommy Wilson dared you to crawl into that abandoned woodshed all full of spiders. Making Grandma mad scares you more than spiders, but this morning she went to the store and left you alone watching cartoons and eating Cocoa Puffs.

And now you've abandoned your cereal, even though it'll be soggy when you go back, the milk all warm and brown. Because you dreamed about the pistol again last night, and who knows when you'll get another chance to look at it? So you pretend Tommy and his nasty scabby-kneed friends are right behind you, teasing and egging you on till you can't back down.

The door swings open quiet and you creep over the threshold. The orange shag swallows your footsteps. No lights, in case you need to run away fast, but the glare from the hall is enough to see by. Back in the living room, Elmer Fudd is hunting rabbits.

The guns are on Grandma's special table, the old vanity she dusts and polishes every Sunday. Pictures cover the mirror--your father and grandfather and great grandfather standing straight and proud in their uniforms. Ribbons and medals and dried flowers hang there too, and you smell the dust that feather dusters can't reach; your nose itches.

The gun you dream of was your great grandfather's, that he gave to Grandpa before he died. A revolver--worn wooden grip and dull grey metal, cool under your cautious fingers. Heavier than you expect and you nearly drop it; your heart races sick and dizzy before you tighten your grip. A lighter space remains on the yellowing lace doily, the ghost of a gun.

You stare at the pistol in your hands, SMITH & WESSON written down the barrel. It leaves a funny taste in your mouth. You're not supposed to touch guns because they're dangerous. Because they kill people. Your great grandfather got this gun in a war. The *war, Grandma says, like there was only one, but even in second grade you can name four.*

This gun must have killed people in its war. Your father did in his--he never talks about it to you, but you heard him fighting with Mom, before Mom left.

Grandma says that Mom is afraid of guns and that's why she ran away. She says lots of other things, too, that you're too young to repeat. You don't know if they're true, but you don't want to be afraid of guns. You've never told anyone about the dreams.

*

...proximate cause of death is a penetrating injury of the pleural cavity and heart...

*

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., September 2007

Cases reached Shadow Unit by tortuous paths. The shootings in Brattonville, Maryland got there by what the BAU at large called the Houdini Clause. If it looked like a stage magician's trick, it went Down the Hall.

And the Brattonville shootings did look like stage magic, the kind of thing Penn and Teller would do on the Tonight Show. According to the local medical examiner's report, there were five dead, all male, all Caucasian, and that was where the victimology stopped making sense.

One twelve-year-old boy, Thomas Wilson. Gunned down in a schoolyard with a single perfect shot. One Air Force Major, Calvin Henley, 35, killed on a Saturday afternoon while grilling chicken in his backyard, while his wife and two daughters set up the badminton net. Again, a single perfect shot to the heart. One truck mechanic, Steven Glennie, 31, shot on the job on Tuesday afternoon at two forty-five, as he rolled out from under a disabled

Kenworth. One Gulf War veteran, James Furtick, 28, shot through the heart as he entered his regular tavern on a Friday just before happy hour. He normally spent a couple of hours there with his old high school buddies, playing an arcade bowling game at which he excelled, despite having lost both arms below the elbow to an IED. And finally, one retired general practitioner, Otto Hollinger, 69, killed while watching a softball game at a local park. Also with a single bullet.

All killed since August 27th. All within four square miles.

Daniel Brady, frowning down at the case file on the table before him, said, "No bullets recovered?"

Nikki Lau flipped gory, glossy photos, mouth slightly open as her tongue worried the center of her lower lip. Because he was a cruel man at heart, Brady not only noticed how carefully Chaz Villette was not watching her--he also allowed himself to *enjoy* it. She said, "No bullets, no casings, no traces of powder, no nothing."

Hafidha Gates tapped a ballistics report with an inch-long fingernail, painted with stylized circuit diagrams in copper, green, and white. "How the hell do you get a front-to-back trajectory on a guy who's lying on a mechanic's dolly? And no bullet in the dolly or the asphalt underneath?"

Daphne Worth glanced at Stephen Reyes before she spoke, which Brady guessed was an improvement from when she only looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She said, "You'd have to be standing right over him. And there are three eyewitnesses. Somebody would have seen *that.*"

Which got Chaz's attention. "Glennie was lying down when he was shot?" He flipped scene photos, a responding officer's hand-drawn map. "There are no tall buildings for a sniper to get vertical in. Maybe a tree, but I'm going to guess there's not a big old tree in the parking lot of a truck repair shop."

Lau said, "Shooter could have been on top of the rig."

Worth shook her head. "Same problem as with standing over the guy. Roof of the shop?"

Esther Falkner shook her head, an understated sideways gesture that Brady considered diagnostic, in her case. It meant she was frustrated, perhaps a little offended by the facts of the case, but playing the level-headed officer.

"The angle's no good. From these, it looks like Glennie was shot standing up and fell over, but he was already bleeding when he tried to stand, and he never made it past half-sitting before he fell back. No one reports hearing a shot."

Hafidha snorted. "Maybe it's the ghost of Lee Harvey Oswald."

"It gets better," Falkner said. With her fingertips, she squared the sheets of her own copy. "Otto Hollinger, the M.D. killed in Lafayette Park. He was standing in the middle of a crowd of people when he was shot. The shooter either doesn't care if he takes out a bystander, or he's capable of making his projectile miss anything other than the intended target--both going in and coming out."

Brady said, "And all five bodies showed both entrance and exit wounds."

He wasn't asking, exactly, but Lau said, "Correct."

"Houdini clause," Stephen Reyes said, the first thing he'd offered since they sat down. "How do you make a bullet disappear?"

Chaz's eyes widened, which made him look like one of those Scandinavian novelty trolls. "That's one hell of a tidy-minded UNSUB."

"I can see why Pauley dumped it on us," Brady said.

"And why *we,*" Falkner said, with a flick of her hand to indicate Reyes as part of that "we," "are dumping it on you. You and Lau head out to Brattonville. Nikki, we need damage control. Some local police has been shooting off his mouth. It's not too far to commute, so we'll stage out of here. Chaz, start the geographic profile. Hafidha and Daphne, work the victimology and paper trail."

"Peachy," said Lau, and as soon as Falkner's back was turned, rolled her eyes at Brady.

Falkner paused by the door. Lau froze like a rabbit in mid-driveway. But Falkner turned, smiled, and said, "Oh, and take coats. It's supposed to rain."

*

Brady wondered how many rural scenes in calendars were shot in Constance County, Maryland. Even under the threatening sky, every turn in the road was a photo op: white farmhouse, big red barn, spreading oak with tire

swing, rolling fields of seed corn drying on the stalk, or pumpkins, or grass with dairy cattle eating it. Turning from the scenery to the case photos and back made both of them look faked.

Lau drove the motor pool sedan so Brady could do victimology out loud. It was better than conversation, because he *knew* the questions Lau was itching to ask. She was a Californian at heart: the concept of personal privacy was a little beyond her. If she wondered about something--your credit rating, your childhood trauma, your weight, your health problems, your income bracket, your sexuality, whether you knew a good therapist--she asked.

The irony was that Lau knew all about hiding secrets under a flawless front. Her own surface was so deceptive he'd almost stopped seeing it. She was just *Lau*, adrenaline junkie, immaculate liar. And then he'd glance at her sideways, like this, looking up from the unwieldy stack of case files in his lap, and he'd see her like a stranger: this gorgeous china-doll woman with her sleek hair and her delicate features, who looked like she shouldn't have a thought in her head beyond making sure her fingernails didn't chip on the steering wheel. Except that Lau kept her nails as short as a man's.

Cognitive dissonance was the technical term, and Lau worked it like a pro.

So don't give her an opening, Danny. And the files on the Brattonville shootings gave him plenty to talk about. Five victims: a twelve year old boy, one man in his late twenties, two in their thirties, and one who would have turned seventy in another three months.

"Well, they're all white males," Lau said.

"Yeah, because *that*'s helpful. An UNSUB in rural Maryland might be white," Brady grumbled. "The age progression is interesting, but I'm not buying that the next victim will be a white man in his eighties."

"Well, it *could* happen." Lau tossed her hair at him, deliberately provocative, and then had to blow her bangs off her forehead.

He grinned. "You wanna stake out the nursing homes?"

Her swipe was halfhearted, because she was driving. But because it was Nikki, and he appreciated her playing along with the pretense that nothing had changed, he let it connect. She said, "Well, what do they have in

common? Aside from all being white, male, and resident in Brattonville, Maryland."

"Two of them served." Awkwardly, balancing a pile of paperwork on his left arm while trying not to intrude too much in the space Lau needed for driving, he flipped open two more folders across his lap. And where was Chaz when you needed a pile of paperwork chewed through, as if with an industrial shredder? "Christ in a Corvette, can't these hick towns afford a scanner? I'd kill to have this on my PDA. No, wait. Three served. Henley was Air Force, Furtick was National Guard--stationed in Tikrit, poor motherfucker--and Glennie was Army."

"What about the 70-year-old doctor? Korea?"

"M.A.S.H. unit, maybe? Hang on, that'd have to be in here somewhere. Military service doesn't just vanish."

"Unless you're Todd." Which made Brady snort. She said, "Just to be totally clear, we have no record of military service for Dr. Hollinger?"

Brady grunted. "Oh. Here it is. He was 4F."

"Flat feet?"

"Four eyes." He rattled the form. "Practically legally blind. Which leaves both him and Thomas Wilson without *that* connection to the others."

"Tommy wasn't even from a military family."

"Too much to hope for, cupcake. Which brings us to the next question. How much *can* a twelve-year-old and a seventy-year-old have in common?"

"They could be related."

"Jeez," Brady said. "Insert joke here about the definition of a virgin in Western Maryland."

Lau gave him a sidelong look, eyebrows raised.

"A girl who can run faster than her brothers," Brady said, and was rewarded by Lau's half-horrified hoot of laughter.

"That wasn't what I meant! Jesus, Brady, you've got a dirty mind."

"I like to play to my strengths."

Rain flecked the windshield, and she flipped the wiper lever once. "Anyway--sheesh--it's a small town, right?"

"Population two thousand and some."

"So they *could* be related."

"Could be," Brady said. "Though if it was a Hatfield and McCoy thing, the penny should have dropped for *somebody* in Brattonville by now."

"They would have known each other."

"Or if they didn't know each other, they knew of each other. Or know somebody in common. My high school in Plano had about that many students. And you can be damned sure everybody knew everybody else, at least by rep."

She took her eyes off the road long enough to shoot him a sideways glance. *Danny Boy, you have just been profiled.* But then she shrugged and said, "They were all shot in places they frequented. In their comfort zones."

"Suggests the killer knew them. Possibly stalked them."

"Or they were targets of opportunity who happened to be where they usually happened to be. Most accidents happen in the home."

"Because most of us spend a lot of time in our homes. Lies, damned lies, and statistics." Brady frowned at the list of victims. "In a place that size, it's almost impossible the killer didn't have some knowledge of the victims. This isn't random. His targets aren't faceless to him."

There was a pause, and then Lau rattled her nails on the steering wheel and said, "Huh. Since August 27th."

"First day of school," Brady said, feeling tightness across his scalp as his eyebrows rose. "Got a plan for the PR situation?"

She shrugged. "Hope it's not as bad as Dad thinks?"

"Hope is not a plan," Brady quoted, and looked down at his files again.

"There's a heartening slogan."

"Unofficial motto of the U. S. Army."

"Boys' clubhouse," she said. He saw her grin out the corner of his eye. "There's always a secret password."

*

You're not supposed to take the gun out of the house, but you've been doing it for weeks. You're not supposed to take it to school, either, but who'll ever know? It fits snug in the bottom of your lunchbox, wrapped in a handkerchief so it doesn't rattle. It's heavy, especially with an apple and two sandwiches, but it makes you feel better.

You don't eat with Katie and Crystal that day, even though you haven't seen them in weeks--Katie really would be afraid if she saw the gun, and you don't want to hear her fuss. Instead you find a picnic table behind the gym. Usually the older kids come out here to smoke, but today it's empty.

August heat weighs on you, thick and sticky even in the shade, but your hands are cold as you open the lunchbox. It was your dad's--solid metal, just a little rusty around the hinges now. Paint worn and chipped, the cartoon faces scraped away and only bits of the G.I. Joe logo and red-white-and-blue left.

And there it is, that familiar cloth-wrapped shape under a squashed sandwich and a bruised apple. Waiting. It itches at the back of your neck like a sunburn. Your stomach rumbles, but you don't reach for the sandwich.

You can hear it all the time now, not just in your dreams. A man's voice, stern and curt like a soldier's on TV, like Daddy's when he got angry. Telling you to pick up the gun. Telling you what you can do with it.

Sometimes it makes you mad that even the voices in your head are soldiers. But at least it doesn't sound like Grandma--that would really drive you crazy.

Footsteps in the grass, and you shut the lunchbox so fast you nearly catch your fingers. Maybe Katie came looking for you, but no--it's Tommy Wilson, grinning that nasty grin.

Crystal thinks he's cute. Grandma says boys pick on you because they like you. But you know better--Tommy is mean. Spiteful to the bone.

It wasn't so bad when you both were little, when you wore grubby jeans and ran fast as the boys and did every dumb thing he dared you to. You could

hold your own then. But Grandma thinks young ladies should wear dresses and not play in the mud, so now your tomboy armor is gone.

So when he starts in on your dress from Sears, it's no surprise. It's where Grandma shops, after all. Your dress and your cheap shoes and your hair that Grandma cuts herself. You can handle that, though. You eat your first sandwich and drink your chocolate milk, even though it's warm now. Sweat trickles down your back, itches under your bra strap--Tommy'd make fun of that too, if he knew about it--but you just stare straight ahead.

But then he starts in about Daddy.

"He left you because you're ugly," he says. "He left you because he didn't love you. Nobody loves you. Your mom left, and your dad left too, and it's because they hated you."

And you know better, but you turn around and look him in the eye. "My dad was a hero. He died in the war. He was a hero." Tommy's bigger than you now, and runs faster, but Daddy always said there were some things you can't just take.

Your hand is in your lunchbox, the battered lunchbox with the faceless G.I. Joes, because Grandma says this one is good enough and you don't need a High School Musical *one like Crystal has. It was good enough for your daddy, and it's good enough for you.*

"Oh yeah," Tommy says. "He was a big hero like G.I. Joe. Well, your stupid lunchbox is gay, and your Dad was gay too. He probably got shot in the back trying to run away."

That sunburned feeling is back now, itching and stinging all over and your skin feels too tight. "He did not," you say, but you can't hear your own voice over the gun. It's cool and heavy in your sweaty hand and it whispers--not stern and demanding anymore, but sweet and comforting like Daddy when he tucked you in at night.

"He did not. He did not."

Your daddy didn't get shot running away.

But Tommy does.

And even though Grandma always said the gun isn't loaded, there's still a crack *and Tommy falls, and blood spreads through the grass in the shade of the old oak tree. You shake all over. You've never been so hungry.*

You wait for the screams and shouts and sirens, but nothing happens. You put the gun away and take your lunchbox and empty milk carton and you walk back to the cafeteria to find Katie and Crystal.

Katie asks what's wrong, but you tell her it's cramps and she believes you. In the last fifteen minutes of lunch you eat your other sandwich and the apple and swipe half of Crystal's chips. You're still hungry when the bell rings, but your hands have stopped shaking.

You're not scared anymore.

*

As an oracle, Nikki Lau thought disgustedly an hour later, she made a pretty good toaster oven. If things in Brattonville weren't precisely "bad," then they were very definitely messy, not at all helped by the fact that the person in local law who'd been shooting off his mouth was the Constance County sheriff.

Sheriff McCutcheon was in his fifties; he'd been sheriff for ten years, and Lau bet he'd been an alcoholic for at least seven of those. He had all the signs, and his deputies were covering for him as if they'd been doing it for a while. McCutcheon also had a theory, and it was this theory he'd been expounding to every microphone he could get near.

Sheriff McCutcheon was convinced Brattonville had a sniper.

"A sniper?" Brady said, doing that politely disbelieving thing where he never quite raised his eyebrows.

"We got plenty of vets," the sheriff said, as if a dearth would be an insult to the county's manhood. "Korea, 'Nam, Persian Gulf. We got boys with *training*."

"And you think one of them has, what? Run amok?" Lau said.

"Men crack under the pressures of war," the sheriff said, giving her a look that said he'd used the word "men" on purpose.

"I'm sure any of my brothers would agree with you, Sheriff," she said gravely.

McCutcheon had the sense to look faintly embarrassed. "Your brothers soldiers?"

"Air Force. When I think of Major Henley's family, I remember my own." There, maybe that would remind the sheriff there was more than enough pressure and cracking to go around.

"So do you know of any veterans in Brattonville who have a history of emotional instability?" Brady flicked Lau a glance of his own, as tightly packed as a .zip file.

"Course not!" the sheriff said, even more offended. "I reckon it's somebody *new.* A drifter maybe."

"So have there been any newcomers in the past six months?" Lau said and watched resignedly as the sheriff hemmed and hawed and blustered and finally said sulkily that he didn't know of any.

Brady stopped on the way out to take a hard look at the map of Constance County posted on the wall, so Lau took the opportunity to smile at the deputy on duty and say, "How seriously are people taking Sheriff McCutcheon's theory?"

"The crazy sniper theory?" Deputy Raintree said. "Ma'am, I'm a veteran myself, and I wish to hell he'd shut up about it." He was dark-complexioned, about the same age as Lau's oldest brother Bob. It was easy to imagine him in uniform. "I know most of the vets around here. They wouldn't do this. Sheriff watches too many Rambo movies, and that's a fact."

"Mmmm." Lau had heard "but Johnny would never do something like that!" too many times to buy it, even from a level-headed man who had all the calm authority the sheriff lacked. "Did you know any of the victims?"

"I knew all of them," Raintree said. He rubbed the back of his neck with one blunt-fingered hand. "I shoot pool with Tommy Wilson's dad. Steve Glennie was on my bowling team, and Jim Furnick used to be."

"Before he lost his arms?"

"Hell of a thing, war," Raintree answered. "We got together on Fridays anyway. All the gang. Well, everybody except Brian. Brian Newman. He was serving in Afghanistan."

"Was?" *Don't go jumping at conclusions, Nikki*. But she readied the condolence-face anyway, just in case she needed it.

Raintree grinned shyly. "He comes home today. Welcome ceremony at the middle school this afternoon."

Brady looked over from his map. "You were there when Furtick was shot."

"Inside the bar," Raintree said. "I didn't see anything. Didn't hear a gunshot either, just heard Jim yell. Turned around and he was lying in the doorway."

Lau nodded. "What about the others?"

"I didn't know Cal Henley all that well, but he helped raise money for a new patrol car last year. Otto Hollinger, though," Raintree said. "Oh, I knew Otto all right. Everybody knew Otto. Something of a local legend. But he was like the sheriff. Not a veteran of anything except hunting season." He sucked his teeth and added, "Speaking of hunting, I'm not sure if it signifies, but he was involved in a little fuss a few years back. Colonel Grossman got himself shot in a hunting accident, and Otto was along. Having an MD in the party didn't change the way it came out, though."

"Grossman died?"

"D.O.A," Raintree confirmed. "Before you ask, there was an inquest, and Hollinger was cleared. Grossman tripped and shot himself."

"No chance Hollinger was killed in revenge?"

"Grossman's got no family left to speak of," Raintree said. "There's a widow. She's sixty or so. Their son Ethan was career Army, married late. Ethan's wife couldn't handle the military spouse thing, took off five or six years ago. She dumped their little girl on Ethan's mom. And then Ethan got killed in Iraq."

"So the Grossmans were a military family?" *I wonder if the daughter was a disappointment for her career Army dad.*

"From way back."

"Huh," Lau said, and this time it was her turn to send Brady the hypercompressed glance.

He said, "I know this sounds like a crazy question, Deputy, but has anybody associated with the case dropped a lot of weight all of a sudden?"

"You mean like obsessed, schizophrenic, not eating?"

They almost always came up with some logical rationale, if you gave them half a chance. "Exactly like that."

Raintree thought for a moment--hard and honestly, or Lau missed her guess. And then he shook his head. "Couldn't say," he said apologetically.

She shrugged. "It's okay. It was a longshot, and you've been great. One last thing before we start on the crime scenes. What's been the disposition of the bodies?"

"County coroner." Raintree had a habit of sliding his wedding ring back and forth over his knuckle. Lau wondered if that were a symptom of discomfort with the marriage, or a subconscious attempt to remind himself of its existence when confronted with an attractive stranger. "They haven't been released to the families."

She reached into her billfold and tugged loose a crisp white card, one of several like it. "Have him--her?--him contact Doctor Frost, at Johns Hopkins. She's our consulting forensic pathologist. The remains will need to be forwarded to her for examination."

"Autopsy." The ring-fiddling stopped, replaced by a grimace and hands stuffed awkwardly in pockets. That would limit his ability to get to his gun.

"It's a capital murder investigation, Deputy."

"I understand that. But it's a small town, and some people just aren't real comfortable with the idea of their loved ones getting sliced up for a second time, when they've already had to go through that once."

"I know." Lau nodded, reassuring. "But they'll be less comfortable with a growing pile of bodies on their lawns. Look, before we start on the crime scenes, I'm going to talk to the reporters, all right? See what I can do for damage control?"

He said, "I'll keep the sheriff off you."

Act II

Maria Henley sat on the end of the bed in her motel room, ankles, knees, elbows, and shoulders pressed tight and close. She seemed even smaller than she normally would be, all wide shallow-set blue eyes and bird-skull bones. Her daughters sat on either side of her. They were sturdier, brown-eyed, round-faced.

Still, the Henleys looked alike now. They were united by their expression: the pretense of calm, built on unfinished grief and a new knowledge that nothing was sure.

"I can't imagine how you're feeling," Lau said. The ritual opening of the interview with a victim's family. The thirteen-year-old, Natalie, teared up, but she swallowed the reaction. Fifteen-year-old Andrea checked her mom's face. Ms. Henley just nodded.

"We need to ask you a few questions about Major Henley. The more we know about him, the better chance we have of finding the person who killed him." Refer to the victim with respectful formality. Avoid jargon like "victimology." The people she talked to had no idea how much complexity lay under the conversation.

Ms. Henley scratched at her left index finger with her right thumb, over and over. "We thought it was an accident. Until the others, and the sheriff said on the news they'd been shot the same way. Everybody liked Cal."

Lau exchanged a quick look with Brady, an invisible eye-roll. The Henleys shouldn't have heard that first on the six o'clock news.

"Officers give orders, enforce discipline," Lau said. "Did anyone serving under your husband make trouble for him?"

"No." Ms. Henley pursed her lips. "No. Of course, there's always complaints. But Cal was fair. Everyone agreed about that."

In other words, yes, no, maybe. Lau kept that off her face.

Brady asked, "Had your husband argued with anyone recently? Were there any locals he disagreed with?"

"Oh, no." She gave a shaky little laugh. "He'll cuss out the talk radio fellows sometimes."

Natalie spoke up. "If Andrea or I were in the car, he'd get red and apologize. You know, for swearing."

Lau used the opening. "Were there any of your friends he didn't like?"

Natalie shook her head. Andrea replied, "He says we're smarter than he was at our age, about who to hang out with."

Ms. Henley smiled at that. "Cal was a little wild in high school. But he straightened up senior year." The pink across her cheeks said, *When we met*.

Natalie looked down at her knees suddenly. "What is it, Natalie?" Lau asked.

Natalie raised her head and clutched her arms across her ribs. "He did have a fight with someone."

Ms. Henley frowned, but Natalie continued, "He did, Mom. Coach Pendergast--the track coach. Dad said he was spending all his time on Maddie Cavanaugh and Karen Pfitzer and ignoring the rest of us."

"Did you agree with him?"

Natalie's mouth set in a line before she answered. "Karen... She's totally amazing, and she's got to get an athletic scholarship. She doesn't say so, but everyone knows." Again the tight mouth, the downward look. "Maddie..."

"The Itsy-Bitsy Spider," Andrea muttered.

"Andi, shut up. Maddie's okay." Natalie met Lau's eyes as if daring her to deny it.

Lau felt Brady behind her, taking mental note. A complex of tiny signals told her so--his drawn breath, the slip of jacket fabric across his shirt as he settled his shoulders. It was armor and fuel. Brady had her back. She didn't have to stand tall by herself.

"Ms. Henley, was your husband active in any servicemen's organizations? Any veterans' clubs?"

Ms. Henley took her daughters' near hands in hers. "Our free time is--was all about the girls. Military families--so many things take you away from home. Cal wanted to spend as much as he could with us."

Natalie took in a hard breath, chopped short, and scrubbed at her eyes with the hand that wasn't in her mother's.

Time for the difficult request. Brady picked it up as if she'd signaled him. "We'd like your permission to look over your house and yard."

Ms. Henley stared blankly at him.

"We'll be careful," he said, as if he were asking to hold a child. Or the collected reminders of a broken life.

*

...The immediate injury did not in this case result in cardiac arrest. However, damage implicating the lungs (a so-called "flap-valve injury") resulted in tension pneumothorax...

*

The Henley's house was a white two-story colonial, generously proportioned for two adults and two teenaged daughters. In the family's absence the house reminded Lau of a bride abandoned at the altar.

Brady went up the two front steps at a bound, then turned and held out his hand for the key.

Lau sighed. "Why do you always have to be the one to unlock the door?"

"Why not?"

"Even if the UNSUB *is* lurking in the hall waiting to pounce, wouldn't it be better if he pounced on me and you clobbered him?" An instant too late, Lau wondered if that would remind him of what had happened in Dallas.

But Brady grinned. "You kidding? If anything pounces on me, I know you'll kick the shit out of it."

"Aww, vote of confidence." It gave her a little spark of warmth, though, to hear him say it.

He held the door wide and, full of stage gallantry, let her precede him--which was also the way it always worked.

She could feel the emptiness of the house as soon as they stood inside. It smelled like wool rugs in damp air and the earliest hint of mildew. Someone

had shut down the AC and furnace fans, and the dehumidifier was connected to those.

Stairs to the second floor ahead on their left, hall to the kitchen straight back, living room to their right. They turned to the living room without having to consult.

A bright, pretty room, done in country style with taste, if not with a lot of money. A couch covered in navy plaid homespun, a high-backed wing chair and a lower Mrs. chair. A few good simple wood antiques, a few reproductions, but no clutter. Of course not; even if the Air Force is paying for your relocation, you have to pack things, and worry over them, and find a place for them when you get there.

Brady stood in the archway surveying before he stepped into the room. "She chose the furniture, but she kept it masculine enough for him."

"Duh." When Brady looked over his shoulder at her, she said, "The spouse keeps the home fires burning. A military significant other sets up camp upon reaching the bivouac and strikes it when the marching orders arrive. She decorated."

"Outside my area of expertise." His carved lips shaped themselves into an expression five minutes past irony.

Lau pretended she hadn't noticed. "Well, that's why you have me. Photos," she added, and pointed with her chin to the maple sideboard.

The largest frame held a formal portrait of the four Henleys. Three round, grinning faces, brown hair, brown eyes--Major Calvin Henley flanked by his daughters, all fearless with joy. Maria Henley, pale and delicate, seemed physically outside the compass of her family. But, at the center bottom of the group, she was the pivot point of their fan. Her happiness was quieter but strong enough to tether them all.

Was it Tolstoy who'd said that all unhappy families were unhappy in their own way? What about happy families who'd been wrenched into unhappiness through no effort of their own?

Smaller photos surrounded the portrait. Father and daughters at Disney World, all in mouse ears, sticking their tongues out for the camera. Natalie in

a warm-up suit, beaming and clutching a trophy. Andrea dressed as the Cat in the Hat, maybe for a school play, laughing.

One photo showed the family before Henley was a Major. He wore his dress blues. Maria Henley stood beside him with a toddler on her hip; the toddler was staring, open-mouthed, at the squinting infant in the crook of Henley's elbow. Henley wore the dazed smile of a lottery winner clutching a giant ceremonial check.

"You okay?" Brady asked.

"Yeah." With enough practice, you got the "Of course, why shouldn't I be?" voice almost every time.

"I'll go see what the second floor has to say."

"I'll be right up."

She heard the stair treads creak under him, and the squeak of the wood floor as he started along the upstairs hall.

Lau's parents' living room was full of photos of young men in blue uniforms. Her own high school graduation picture stood among them like a footnote. On the mantlepiece was the photo Dad had taken four Christmases ago, of the rest of the family posing on the front porch. Her three brothers, her mom on the far right with her arm around Tim's waist and her eyes on her sons, and Nikki, on the left, close but not leaning in, chin up, smiling straight into the lens.

She passed through the dining room to the kitchen. The calendar beside the wall phone was dense with notes: *A--choir 4 pm. N--Orthodontist 3:30. Send A's perm. for Span. Club trip!!! Bake sale 4 track team. Cal--eye appt. 1 pm.* The refrigerator was a mosaic: three tickets to the school musical, a photocopied schedule of varsity girls' track meets under an enameled F-16 magnet, a flyer for a squadron reunion in South Carolina in November. A notice for a one-day seminar on UAV deployment for ground surveys.

Lau couldn't tell from the evidence if Cal Henley had been a good officer. But it suggested he might have been a good father.

She found Brady in a home office off the master bedroom. "No hate mail, no sign that he knew the other victims," he said, looking up from the papers on

the desk. "His gun safe's in the bedroom closet, locked, and there's no handgun near the bed, so he didn't feel threatened at home."

"Should we get the lab on his guns?"

Brady frowned, a dissatisfied god. "Without ballistics to match, it wouldn't prove anything. And what the hell kind of mythology makes that evidence disappear? I can see policing your brass, but how do you get rid of the bullet?"

"Magic."

"Exactly. Everything about the Henleys I've seen so far says they don't believe in miracles. See anything downstairs about church or prayer group?"

"Not a thing. Or any connection to the other victims."

He sighed. "Let's get to the outside before it starts raining again."

The French doors in the dining room opened onto a deck overlooking the back yard. Brady fetched scene and autopsy photos from the car and spread them out on the deck rail, weighted with pebbles. He frowned over them, then walked out onto the lawn.

Lau stood on the deck, beside the place where the grill would have been if it weren't in an evidence locker somewhere, and thought, *Watching Daniel Brady profile a crime scene ought to be a spectator sport. People would pay good money for this.*

He picked his way around the yard like a great sleepy tiger, glancing this way and that, frowning. Thinking, because there was a lot more to Brady than a pretty face and a neck like a carthorse's.

Lau contemplated the blood spatter soaked into the weathered redwood, the foundation plantings, the photos. The badminton net, half-set-up when Major Henley died, sagged now, tangled with two weeks of rain and blowing leaves. From the way Brady walked, the yard was soggy, and from the clouds blowing up from the southwest, Maryland was about to prove the weather report right again.

Somebody had planted willows at the bottom of the slope, to take up some of the moisture. Somebody who planned to live here for a long time. How long had the Henleys lived here? Had they planted willows, thinking they'd

be here to watch them grow into shady rooms with leaf-curtain walls? They would have lived in base housing long enough to value permanence.

Her own family's days of living on base ended before Nikki was born, but she'd heard the stories; how there wasn't room in their four-plex apartment for a crib for Bobby, so he slept in the bottom dresser drawer; how the mothers on base babysat each other's kids in a herd, like some tribal society.

Maybe Ms. Henley had done that. And Major Henley would have come off duty, come home to news of the tribe as gathered and passed on by its women and children. Nikki wondered if he was proud of his daughters, thirteen and fifteen. The house suggested he was.

Brady paused beside the unraised side of the badminton net, in the shade of an oak, and turned over his shoulder to look up at the house. "Great line of sight from here. I've got you clear as day."

"You think it's Henley's wife? Or one of his kids? In spite of the magic?"

"First victim and last victim are the most important, generally speaking."

"So that's Brady for *No*?"

He flipped her off. "Nikki, can you move two feet right?"

"Stand where Henley would have been standing." She glanced down, found the scar marks of the grill wheels on the deck, and shuffled into the footsteps of a dead man. "The tree's in the way now. Though it's easier to shoot around than the engine block on a semi."

"Yeah, but it doesn't do my theory any good. Look around. Tell me what you've got."

It was her turn to rotate slowly in place. "Willow trees. A cold breeze on my neck. Line of sight into the next yard--*hello*."

"I heard that penny drop. Whatcha see?"

"Treehouse in an apple tree two backyards over. Suddenly I feel awful naked up here."

Brady smoothed a hand down the front of his jacket, on the side that covered his holster. "Let's go find out if the neighbors are home."

As they headed for the street, Lau called Hafidha and asked her to see whether Calvin Henley had past memberships in any servicemen's clubs.

"You like the military angle," Brady said.

"Yeah. And no. It's three of the five victims. And nobody loves an officer." She was pleased when he grinned. "But it's *only* three. And they served in three different branches. They didn't serve together, and only two of them socialized." She had to stretch to match his stride, which she knew he was shortening for her sake.

"Still, three out of five. As Chaz would say, statistically significant."

The widower in whose yard the somewhat tumbledown treehouse lived was happy to allow them access, especially once he heard they were investigating the death of Major Henley. Neither Lau nor Brady thought it was a great idea to trust the tree with Brady's weight, or to trust the rotten ladder nailed to the trunk at all. So Lau handed Brady her jacket, and Brady made a stirrup of his hands and hoisted Lau. She slithered on moist wood across the floor, edged up to the wall of the treehouse that faced the Henley's property, and peered through a gap in the boards.

The gap framed a view of the Henleys' deck. And there was a gouge in the silvered wood, a yellow patch bright as paint, as if somebody had jammed something metal in there. "Got you, you son of a bitch," she muttered.

Brady must have heard her, because he made a throat-clearing noise below. "You ready to come down yet?"

"Found it," Lau said, the adrenaline singing in her veins as a light rain began to rustle the leaves and patter on the tarpaper roof overhead. "Brady, he was *here.*"

Brady didn't need to give her a lift down. She just swung and jumped. When she was on the ground again, she dusted her blouse and looked up, down, sideways, then circled the tree. Wet grass soaked her trouser hems, and half-green windfalls rolled beneath her shoes. Twenty feet away Brady was making a slow rotation in place, frowning at the scenery.

At the foot of the ladder, Lau stopped. The top edge of two of the old wood slats had splintered away, as if someone had put weight on them. Recently; like the gouge in the treehouse wall, the exposed wood looked fresh.

Rain dripped faster. Brady pointed his patented glower at the sky, exactly as if it might be impressed by his bravado. "Isn't their latest war hero coming home today? Guess it's going to rain on their parade," he said.

Lau groaned. "Even Schwarzenegger couldn't pull off a line that bad, Action Guy."

The yard was overgrown along the fenceline. The house had reached that stage of its life when it had become too much for its elderly owner. When he passed on or moved out, it would go on the market at a loss--to some young family who would fix it up and brighten it up, and prepare it for the next fifty-year cycle.

Houses, Lau thought, knew all about the wheel of fortune.

She was distracted from her moment of introspection when Brady said, "Jackpot."

He was pointing to the huge green mass of a weeping shrub that had devoured a quarter of the yard. Its borders edged up to the shade of the cobby old apple tree that supported the treehouse. Lau said, "It's a bush."

"It's a *forsythia* bush." He strode forward and plunged both hands into the drooping canes. With a sharp tug, he shifted them aside, revealing a green, four-foot tall vegetative cavern, floored with bare dirt, roofed with the arching limbs of the shrub. Lau crouched for a better look. Back in the cool shadows, as rain dripped down her neck, she could make out the square-mesh wire fence.

And the place by one of the tall green metal posts where it had been snipped or wiggled loose, and the wire bent up in a triangle.

Brady said, "How do kids get around a town? They have trails through the woods and breaks in the neighbors' hedgerows, that's how."

"Limited geographic area," Lau said. "Small enough distances to bike or walk." She closed her eyes. "And someone light enough to climb that ladder. Shit, Danny. It's a kid."

"First victim," he said. "Daily contact. Come on. We need to talk to Tommy Wilson's people. And get a Bureau forensics team in here, if the rain's left anything. I'm not leaving this to the local CSIs."

*

The rain had become a downpour before they made it back to the car, thick fat drops that gave no hint of tapering. They splashed on the windshield, slapped aside by the wipers. Lau's punching the buttons on the satellite radio was going to drive Brady to run off the road into a tree before too much longer. "Family," he said, to distract her.

She shook her sodden head. He hoped her blouse wasn't dry-clean only, and briefly amused himself picturing Chaz's reaction to its current state of transparency. "Teachers," she said. "Then classmates. Then family."

He wasn't any drier, and the car was turning into a swamp of damp fabric and fogged windows. "Heat or AC?"

"*Heat.*"

Well, yeah, with her body mass, she didn't retain heat well. He could suffer through it. He cranked it up all the way, his reward her sigh of comfort as she kicked out of her shoes and stretched her feet to the vent.

"First day of school," he said, resuming the argument about where to go. "The teachers and students would barely have met Tommy."

"*Au contraire, mon ami*. School system as small as Brattonville's? The sixth grade teachers *are* the seventh grade teachers. And the more foundation we've got going into the parent interviews, the better. Because you know those are going to suck."

Something was under her skin. The case, maybe. It was worst when it was kids--kids as victims, or kids as gammas. The weapon on his hip dug in under the ribcage, as if choosing that moment to remind him of its existence. The problem with letting go of convenient untruths is that they're *convenient*.

He bit the inside of his cheek. *Change the subject.* To one at least marginally less uncomfortable. "Thanks, Nik."

She'd been staring out the window, watching the watercolor roadside glide by. "For climbing trees for you?"

"For--" he shrugged. "Not making a fuss."

She rolled her eyes. "Like I didn't know."

"All of it?" A dump truck hauling a backhoe clogged the road in front of them. He kept his hands off the horn, but he didn't mind swearing in front of Nikki, so he muttered, "Oh, fuck this noise," and thumped the steering wheel.

"Careful, there, Anger Management Man." She elbowed him. "I knew the important bits. Come on. Not even one tiny little pass even once? You were either gay or racist, and I knew it wasn't the latter. And anybody could tell you'd lost something to a gamma. Are you gonna pass that guy or what?"

"I was waiting for the dotted yellow." He pulled out. "I'm not Chaz." As they slid back into their lane, he said, "All right, you win. Teacher. But your punishment is that you have to call Hafidha for addresses, and then call the witnesses and set up the interviews."

"Harsh punishment," she said.

He answered, "Hey. I'm driving."

*

...which would have resulted very quickly in the death of the patient, as emergency response was delayed.

*

You're not supposed to go into the teacher's lounge, but the door is open and you hear the TV, and you really don't want to go to the gym for the stupid speech, even if it is better than Social Studies with Mr. Burns. So you stop and poke your head in and Katie leans in with you, though she makes that nervous we're not supposed to do this *noise of hers.*

A few teachers are inside, their attention on the news. The news is always stuff in Baltimore or DC or somewhere else you've never been and you almost leave, but then you recognize the pictures behind the reporter's frosted blonde hair.

She's talking about Brattonville. She's talking about you.

Your stomach gets all funny and small, and you move closer. Katie makes the noise again, but follows you.

"...Constance County sheriff has called in the FBI to consult on the Brattonville shootings," the reporter says in her serious voice, her face calm as a mask under her perfect makeup. "The Bureau's Nicolette Lau says

they've rejected the sniper scenario put forward by the Sheriff's Department."

Katie tugs on your sleeve, but you take another step. The news cuts to another woman, a dark-haired woman who's prettier than the reporter, prettier than anyone you've ever seen in Brattonville. The caption says she's Special Agent Nicolette Lau.

"After detailed analysis of the forensic evidence, we were able to rule out a long-distance shooter. We believe these are targeted murders, not random acts, and that Brattonville residents in general are not in danger. If you have information about the circumstances of the victims' deaths or their connections to each other, please call the tip hotline on your screen."

Katie scuffs her shoe loud enough that the teachers turn to look at you, and you want to kick her. You clutch your backpack tight to your chest, and the gun inside must weigh fifty pounds, and they must see it--

But Ms. Jorgensen, the librarian, makes a sympathetic sound in her throat. "It's awful, isn't it? But don't worry, the FBI says we're not in any danger." Her throat works, and you don't think she believes that, but she's trying so hard to be cheerful that you nod.

"You should go on down to the gym," she says, "or you'll be late."

"Sure thing, Miss J," Katie says, and tugs your sleeve harder. You let her pull you out, fall in with the last of the stragglers dragging their feet toward the gym. You're holding your bag so tight your elbows might crack if you tried to let go.

The gym is hung all over with streamers and balloons and "Welcome Home Brian!" banners, the floor polished shiny. Somebody even repainted the cartoony red and white Corbit Heights cougar, and it snarls at everyone from the wall.

The bleachers are full, the air thick with voices and the drumming of bored feet. You don't see Crystal--she probably snuck outside to kiss Aiden Marks again, and you don't even want to think about that.

You pick your way to an empty corner on the top row. Katie gets distracted by some other friends on the way, but that's all right. You don't think you could talk to her right now anyway.

The FBI is in Brattonville. The FBI is looking for you. It's like a movie, like Silence of the Lambs*, which you watched at Crystal's last year even though Grandma said it was too scary for you. You'll have to be careful, not listen to the gun for a while. Sometimes it talks so loud you can't think, and when you get angry it's always there.*

You feel bad for Andrea and Nat--they were never mean to you. But when you saw them so happy in their yard with both their parents there... With their dad, who came home when yours didn't...

You dig in your bag for some cookies, even though you feel a little queasy, trying not to touch the gun at the bottom. You can't listen to it for a while, no matter how angry or sad you get. Not until the FBI goes away. The Oreos taste like sugary chalk, but you eat them anyway--you're always hungry now, eating second dinners with Katie so your stomach doesn't hurt all night long.

The principal is on the stage now, talking about why you're here today, about your Armed Forces and why they're so important, and you wish he'd shut up. He sounds like Grandma, saying things like freedom and honor and duty. More like never home, always gone, dead. Like your mother's gone. Like your daddy isn't coming home. Dead and gone and left you all alone to grow old and crazy like Grandma.

Plastic crinkles under your hand and the last Oreo crumbles to dust and paste inside the package. Keep reaching down, past the books, past the tangle of gym clothes, till your hand closes on the handle of the gun. Cool and slick, warming quickly against your palm. You shouldn't, you shouldn't, but it's so comforting. The gun won't leave you, it promises. It won't run away, won't die. It will always be there for you.

The doors open and a man walks in and everyone starts cheering. Like thunder, shaking the bleachers, rumbling through your bones. The man waves, his uniform neat, boots shiny. A medal flashes on his chest as he turns to smile at everyone.

Your neck prickles, cheeks warming; your mouth tastes like tinfoil. Nobody did anything like this the few times your dad came home. Nobody did anything when he died, except mutter condolences to Grandma and avoid your eyes. Why is Brian Newman so damn special?

The gun is nearly free of your backpack now, and you should let go. There's too many people in here. The police are here. Someone will see you. Except they're all looking at Brian Newman, at his shiny boots and shinier medal. All they care about is the flash and shine, the movie special effects and explosions where nobody important gets hurt. And if somebody dies, then they must not have mattered after all.

The gun fills your head with its promises. Nobody's looking at you as Brian Newman climbs the steps of the stage, and the applause hurts your ears. He's not so damn special.

Your finger convulses on the trigger.

Newman stumbles on the last step, falls forward onto the stage. The principal frowns, says something you can't hear over the thunder. Then blood threads across the polished boards.

Then the screaming starts.

You shove the gun back in your bag as nauseous hunger-spit floods your mouth. Your head is too light, sick and spinning. Teachers run for the stage, shouting at each other. The policemen in the front row stand up, some reaching for their guns. They all look like they're moving through molasses.

You can't keep the gun. They'll know it's here--they'll search everyone, worse than when the drug dogs come. But you can't just throw it away. It was your great-grandfather's. Grandma will never forgive you for losing it.

But she's not going to forgive you if you go to jail for shooting people, either. And if the gun had just shut up and not made you use it, you wouldn't have to get rid of it. There's a big trashcan right below you, and everyone's still watching the stage, where the principal is trying to stop Newman's bleeding.

You scrub the pistol against your dress trying to get rid of the fingerprints, but there's not enough time. A shove and it falls into the trash in a grey and brown blur, vanishing into the mess of soda cans and chip bags.

Katie scrambles up the bleachers, her face all pale and splotchy. Your hands are shaking and you feel sick, but everyone else is scared too and no one notices.

The gun promised not to abandon you, but now you've abandoned it. Maybe it will leave you alone now--the thought makes you sad and nervous and

relieved all at once.

But as you put your arm around Katie, you can still feel it in the back of your head.

*

It was still only late afternoon when they made it to the white frame house down the block from Corbit Heights Middle School. Lucky contestant number one was a Kendall Givens, who--as Lau had predicted--served as Brattonville's sixth, seventh, and eighth grade English teacher.

He let them in and offered hot tea--Lau said yes, Brady no, pretty sure from Givens' L.L. Bean slippers that 'tea' would turn out to mean something frilly imported from England--and settled them in the living room. Judging by the heavy wooden furniture and a bit of stage business involving tarnished silver sugar tongs, Brady would bet that Givens wore a lot of tweed.

"You've caught me playing hooky," Givens said on a nervous smile. "I'm supposed to be at the celebration at the gym. But grading essays waits for no man, eh?" He jerked a hand toward the untidy pile of papers on a gateleg table under the window.

This was Lau's gig. Brady settled back, comfortable in his role as a placeholder for Bad Cop--a reminder that Bad Cop could be along any minute, if Good Cop wasn't getting the right kind of cooperation--and read the titles of Givens' books as if he weren't paying any attention to the conversation at all. "You've probably guessed," Lau said, leaning forward, "that we're here to ask you a few questions about Tommy Wilson. It's all routine. Well, as routine as anything can be in a murder investigation."

Givens, biting his lip, nodded and picked up his tea. "Anything I can do to help."

"Can you tell me what Tommy was like? Who his friends were? What crowd he hung with?"

"Oh." Givens sat back in his chair, arms crossed. Lau stayed open, though, head tilted slightly, nonthreatening.

Lau said, "I realize it can make you uncomfortable to speak frankly of the dead."

"He wasn't a bad kid--" Givens started, but he interrupted himself with a snort. "No, he was a bad kid. He used to be just a rough kid. But. Adolescent hormones and lack of supervision. He was mean, Agent Lau. And he was fourth of five, with a divorced mother. He didn't get a lot of love at home." Givens' face pinched. "It's why the body wasn't found until classes let out; everybody just assumed he was cutting class again. If we had searched promptly-- I could have insisted. This is not TV. People survive gunshot wounds in real life. Maybe there was time."

Lau touched his hand. "Mr. Givens."

"Sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry."

"You're doing fine. How well do you know his friends?"

"I know them all," Givens said. "English is required for every year. They all come through my class."

Lau nodded. She sipped her tea. Brady hid a smile when Givens mirrored her. Ahh, the old Nikki Lau magic touch. The mouthful of tea seemed to settle Givens.

She said, "Have any of your students experienced a personality change lately? Or exhibited an unexplained illness? Sudden weight loss? Acting out? Violent to others? Anything out of the ordinary?"

His cheeks blanched. "You're talking about signs of abuse," he said.

Lau didn't answer. Brady leaned forward, though, and rested his elbows on his knees. "We're not questioning your reporting, Mr. Givens. Or your professional ethics." Which of course reinforced his sense that that was exactly what they was doing.

Lau smiled, Encouraging Smile #25a, reserved for floundering witnesses and survivors. "Just think back," she said.

He hooked the tip of his tongue over his front teeth and looked up and to the right, which encouraged Brady to think he might be working on a truthful, considered answer. No obvious tells. Nothing striking.

"Madelyn Cavanaugh," he said. "I'm not sure enough yet to intervene, but she's changed since last year. Of course at this age they're all changing-- discovering boys and girls, going into adrenal overdrive, minds on anything

but schoolwork. But I've been wondering about anorexia. I think there's something going on with her at home."

Madelyn, Brady thought. *Maybe it goes with the name*.

Brady kept his eyes on Givens' face, on the faint flush of embarrassment coloring his cheeks. Inconclusive, but there wasn't an obvious reason for him to lie. "Thank you," Lau said. "Are there any students whose schoolwork has--"

Another standard question. She and Brady were both feeling the chase now, and intent enough on the answer that they jumped like shocked rabbits when Lau's phone rang. Just the generic ring, so it wasn't anyone on the team. She held a finger up to Givens, flipped it open, and said, "Lau."

A brief pause, during which her brow grew steadily more creased. Then she said, "We're enroute. Thank you." and cut the connection.

Before the phone flipped closed, she was on her feet. "Thank you, Mr. Givens," she said. "I'm afraid something's come up. We may be in contact with you later."

Ninety seconds later, from the passenger seat of the car, in the still-driving rain, Brady said, "What's up?"

Lau triggered the behind-grille lights on their motorpool sedan and hit the accelerator, burning through gathering evening like the California driver she was. "Somebody just shot that homecoming soldier in the middle school gymnasium, and Deputy Raintree has recovered the gun."

Act III

"This kinda thing doesn't *happen* here."

Most law enforcement professionals had heard that before. Lau wasn't used to it from a police officer, though. The cop was a young patrolman standing by the gym door. He was talking to--based on her encouraging look and her notebook--a reporter. Not *Baltimore Sun*; Lau knew most of them by sight. County seat paper, probably.

Sheriff McCutcheon's face was waxy with nerves. His hand rested on the butt of his pistol, and his gaze darted around the gymnasium, across the

stunned residents in the bleachers, the flag-hung stage occupied by borrowed crime scene techs, the frightened town council members herded and huddling under the basketball net. "One shot straight to the heart, just like the others. Your shooter's in here right now," he told Brady and Lau. "We locked this place down soon as it happened."

McCutcheon looked over his shoulder again, clearly expecting someone with a ski mask and a rifle to materialize behind him. Brady murmured in Lau's ear, "Which doesn't mean the horse hasn't left the barn."

He was right. Half the local police had been here when Sergeant Brian Newman, who must have dodged a lot of gunfire in a long deployment in Afghanistan, walked up the steps to accept his hero's welcome home. But they wouldn't move as fast as the killer would. And, like McCutcheon, they might have expected Death to look the way it did on the evening news.

Not like a neighbor's kid. Who might, in fact, still be in the gym.

Deputy Raintree came out from under the bleachers, crossed the room to Lau, and held out an evidence bag. "Photographed *in situ*. It's all yours, agents." His face was tense and hard, but his eyes were red. He'd told them when they first arrived: Newman was an old friend.

"I'm sorry," Lau said, but briskly, because it would be cruel to break Raintree down again. He bobbed his head once, sharply, and she took the bag.

It was an old revolver, and had seen some hard use. The steel was dulled and faintly pitted, and the grips were scarred. The backstrap was dented, as if someone had once pounded a nail with it. She handed the bag to Brady.

The reporter had lured McCutcheon away for an interview. Lau resolved to snag the reporter and trade an FBI statement for a chance to hear and rebutt the Sheriff's comments.

"I assigned officers to talk to everyone here," Raintree said. "They're not half done. But there's something about this doesn't make sense."

Lau leaned forward, and realized it was the same pose the reporter had struck with the patrolman. "Tell me, Deputy."

"Nobody they talked to heard the shot. Didn't matter where they were in the room, they all said it. But that old repeater would have sounded like the

crack of doom in this echo chamber, even with these people and the PA and all."

Lau carefully didn't look at Brady. "What do you think happened?"

"Damned if I know. Because you can't put a silencer on that S&W. And I can't see why someone would shoot Brian with one gun and leave a different one for us to find."

Lau opened her mouth to ask him not to speculate in public, but he added, "I know. I won't say anything. May as well let this sonofabitch think he's played us."

"We can't hold these people indefinitely."

"We're getting the names and addresses of everyone here, and searching if it makes sense." Raintree shrugged. "They're local folks. We know almost all of 'em. It won't take long."

"Thanks, Deputy."

When he'd gone, she looked up at Brady. He was holding the bag in both hands, but his eyes were on the room. He wore the still, focused hunting-cat face that said he was running the scenarios: lines of sight to the stage, places of concealment, exit routes. How the UNSUB could have entered, hidden, fired. Where the gun was found relative to everything else.

He dropped his gaze to the evidence bag, as if his mental movies had led him there. "I'm breaking the seal," he said. She nodded. She'd be able to swear, when it was resealed, that he hadn't tampered.

Brady opened the bag, held it to his nose, and sniffed. He frowned and handed it to her.

It smelled of old metal and oil and not a hint of smoke.

Brady pulled his cellphone out and thumbed a number. "Frost," he said as he put it to his ear. "Think it'll bother her if Newman's still warm?"

*

Madeline Frost often had the luxury of scheduling BAU-related work for hours when the autopsy room would be empty of other pathologists. Because it was afternoon, a more commonplace hour for postmortems than she preferred, today she had to share the autopsy theatre with one other

prosector. However, Dr. Hutchins was unlikely to disturb her with idle conversation.

She nodded to him, as was polite, and then walked past him to the far corner of the gleaming white tile and stainless-steel theatre with its four perforated work surfaces on their spotless oval pedestals and its four towering free-standing scales. By coincidence, the bench she selected was nearest the enormous marble slab of the hospital's original, primitive autopsy table, which hung on the wall in a monument to sentimentality.

Madeline Frost preferred not to work with a diener--the German word for a pathologist's assistant meant *servant*, which amused her in an orthographic sort of way--in cases where her own physical strength was adequate to the task of positioning the decedent, once a pair of aides--or Boris the morgue attendant, unassisted--had placed him or her on the autopsy table. When the size, obesity, or musculature of the decedent required the help of an aide, she preferred Boris's quiet and unobtrusive assistance, and would schedule such dissections around his availability.

In a case such as this, with the decedent so small and light, she could handle the entire process unassisted, which she found pleasing. Self-sufficiency should be a comfort to any sentient creature.

When Thomas Wilson's nude body was positioned to her satisfaction, chest expanded by the body block beneath his back and the long whip-stitched Y-incision of his previous, incompetent autopsy delineated by the glare of the brilliant overhead lights, Madeline selected her scalpel, long-handled and with a #22 blade, for reaching deep into the body. The tissues penetrated by the projectile--if it were a projectile--had been sectioned out and preserved in formalin. However, she was not yet prepared to believe what they indicated without a closer inspection, and that began with examining the rest of the decedent.

She knew what she would find within the body cavities: an inelegant jumble of dissected organs, dumped back in at random when the original pathologist had finished with them. It frustrated her to think how much potential information had been lost to the proddings of an overeager amateur. She wished she had a fresh decedent to work with.

Still, she would make do.

She was neatly nipping the stitches along the Y-incision near the decedent's pubic bone when her BAU cell buzzed at her belt. Because her double-gloved hands were still clean, she laid the scalpel down across Mr. Wilson's abdomen--the blade pointing away from any potential passers-by--and fumbled with the case.

Special Agent Daniel Brady.

She thumbed the green button, and identified herself.

*

Brady kept one hand cupped around the mouthpiece of his cell to reduce noise, but Lau heard him clearly anyway. "He's all yours," he said. She suspected that it was a point of pride for him to interact with the aptly-named Dr. Frost exactly as if she were something resembling a normal human being. "We're sending him back express. I'm coming with. I want to hand-deliver the weapon the sheriff's office recovered to the lab, and then I plan to loom over them until they I.D. and print it. So don't say I never gave you anything."

Whatever Frost said in reply, he answered, "See you in the morning, Doctor," and folded away his cell. And then grinned at Lau. "The break in the case," he said. "Are you coming back to Suck Central with me?"

The Hoover Building, in Brady's own inimitable style. "I've got Madelyn Cavanaugh to track down," she said. She flicked his arm. "Try not to provoke Frost. You don't know what she's capable of."

Brady made a face. "Actually, I provoke her because I *do*."

*

There were no Cavanaughs on the list of people in the middle school gym. But as Brady had pointed out, that didn't mean there hadn't been any during the shooting.

The average household income in Brattonville was above the national average, but judging by the sprawling, immaculate faux Tudor house and the BMW sedan in the drive, the Cavanaughs were *loaded*. As Lau walked past the car, she put a hand on the hood and listened for the tick of cooling metal. The car had been there a while. But the gym was only six blocks away. No problem for a thirteen-year-old on the middle school girls' track team.

On the other hand, when she answered the door Ms. Cavanaugh--Deanna--looked as if she were ready to go out or had just come back. Either she had great taste in makeup and clothes, or she took the advice of the Clinique ladies and the Bloomie's personal shopper. Her hair was feathery-short and frosted-tan. *Careful* was the first descriptive word that popped into Lau's head. The second was *rigid*.

Cavanaugh's smile was perfectly judged for greeting a high-end law enforcement rep at the front door. "Agent Lau? Come in, please. Sit down." She barely glanced at Lau's I.D. as she stepped back and made the universal enter-of-your-own-will gesture.

Deanna Cavanaugh was not nervous about a visit from the FBI. It wasn't normal.

House and Garden, Lau thought when she saw the living room. It was like Cavanaugh's exterior: as if it had come as a package. Unlike the Henley's living room, there was no family here. There was certainly no teenage daughter.

"Ms. Cavanaugh, did you know about the welcoming celebration for Sergeant Brian Newman this afternoon?"

Cavanaugh sat and pinched her trouser creases straight over her knees. "I saw it in the local paper, yes."

"Were you there?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm not very patriotic."

Curious thing to say, curious way to say it. "What about your husband and your daughter?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Were they there?"

"My husband is out of town. He travels on business several days a week. And it doesn't sound like something Madelyn would be interested in."

If there was one constant in Lau's experience, it was that parents--military spouses on military bases, classmates' parents in public schools--kept each other informed. Sharing information was the best defense for your children. And yet, Cavanaugh wasn't out there in the rain with the other parents,

parked at the curb in her glossy sedan, wearing out the airwaves passing rumors on her cellphone.

No one had called to tell Cavanaugh that there had been a shooting at the gym, and that the school was locked down.

"Where is Madelyn, Ms. Cavanaugh? I'd like to ask her a few questions."

Cavanaugh straightened in her chair and closed her hands on the armrests. She wasn't nervous about talking to the FBI. But her daughter talking to them bothered her a lot. "What could you have to ask my daughter?"

"Is she at home?"

"Of course not. She's in school today."

Of course not. There was something so wrong in that house that Lau wanted to reach for the Taurus on her hip, just to know it was there. If Brady had been with her, he would have vibrated like a tuning fork.

At the rear of the house, out of sight, a door opened.

Deanna Cavanaugh flushed under her mineral foundation. "Madelyn!" Her voice was high, out of a tightened throat. She half turned her head toward the archway behind her, that by the relentless logic of houses must lead to the dining room and kitchen.

No footsteps heralded her arrival; Madelyn Cavanaugh simply appeared in the opening, as if she'd solidified out of the air.

It wouldn't have taken much air. *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*, Andrea Henley had called her. She was so thin Lau could see the shape of her shoulder joints under her t-shirt. She hunched her head down between them, and folded her hands in front of her like a child in a recital.

The t-shirt would be too big by several sizes even if Madelyn were her ideal weight. So would the sweatpants she was wearing. Her eyes, sunk in her skull and surrounded by dark, unhealthy-looking skin, were fixed on the floor.

Lau's stomach clenched at the shape of the half-finished puzzle in her head. Sudden massive weight loss in a teenaged girl. Exercise bulimia? Anorexia? Or conversion?

Cavanaugh looked toward her daughter, but not, Lau thought, quite at her. Denial could prompt that. Or fear. "Where were you? Why weren't you in school?"

"I didn't want to go to the rally. I was running."

"You need to tell me where you're going to be, Madelyn. It's for your own safety."

" I t--" Madelyn's lips cut off the word "told," like a fragment of a stutter.

Cavanaugh blinked and smiled at Lau. Lau could feel the distance she'd put between herself and the room, as if Lau and Madelyn were on the other end of a video conference. "I'm sorry, I should have asked. Would you like some tea? Coffee?"

Madelyn jerked her face toward Lau, as if noticing her for the first time.

There was a young woman at Idlewood named Jessica Kelly. Just Chaz's age, a few years younger than Lau, and a sexual abuse survivor. One of the first hosts brought in alive, back in the days when there was no Shadow Unit; just Reyes and sometimes Todd, working half in their spare time on the cases nobody else really wanted. Lau had interviewed her extensively.

Sweet kid, if you weren't Stephen Reyes, whom Lau was reasonably confident Jessi would kill on sight if she could.

Signs of abuse led into signs of the anomaly; one fed into another, and you couldn't always draw a bright line. Trauma opens all sorts of cracks.

And parents lie for their children. And for themselves.

"I'd like a glass of water, actually," Lau said. Good--steady voice. A glass of water might buy her time to observe, but not alarm.

"Madelyn, dear, bring us two glasses of water."

Madelyn disappeared like a magic trick. Lau heard tiny sounds from the kitchen. The girl had practiced not making noise, not drawing attention.

Cavanaugh said, "My daughter wouldn't know anything about your investigation. She's very solitary. She doesn't make friends with other children. When she's not in school, she's in her room." Cavanaugh flushed again, remembering that Lau knew better.

Madelyn came back with water in blown-glass goblets, walking carefully even though they were only two-thirds full. She walked behind Lau's chair--the back of Lau's neck prickled, suddenly cold--and set the glass on a ceramic hunting-scene coaster on the end table. It made no sound when it touched.

Lau wished, sharp and hard, for Daniel Brady.

"Thank you, Madelyn." Lau turned and laid her arm along the chair back. The sudden intimate move made Madelyn step back. "I'm Nikki Lau, with the FBI. Natalie Henley mentioned you to me. She called you Maddie. Do you prefer that?"

Cavanaugh cleared her throat. "Madelyn's always called by her full name at home."

Lau swiveled back to Cavanaugh, and her face was neutral and pleasant by the time she said, "Does your husband not like nicknames?"

Cavanaugh shook her head and pinched and pinched at her trouser creases.

Madelyn's a beautiful name. Beautiful and sweet, like you. Why would you want to be called something else? When your girlfriends come here to play, they can call you Madelyn.

Two women, careful and rigid, who didn't meet each other's eyes.

"May I speak to your daughter alone, Ms. Cavanaugh?"

"No. No, I don't think that would be very responsible of me, do you?"

All right, then. "Maddie, I was talking to Natalie about her father's death. Did you meet Major Henley?"

Madelyn clutched her arms as if she was cold. "You're here to find out who killed him."

Lau heard Cavanaugh shift in her chair. "Yes. And Tommy Wilson, too. Did you know him?"

Madelyn raised her head, met and held Lau's gaze. "Tommy Wilson was a dickhead."

"Madelyn!"

Lau pressed the air with one hand, and Cavanaugh fell silent. "Mr. Givens, your English teacher, agrees with you. Did you know any of the other people who were shot?"

Madelyn shook her head.

"Why do you think someone would kill Tommy?"

"He liked to hurt people. He figured out the worst thing anyone could say to you, then he'd say it. He told Melinda Grossman that her dad died in Iraq because a missile hit the rock he was hiding under."

"Do you know anyone who hated Tommy?"

Madelyn's shoulders rose a half-inch higher. "We all did."

"Madelyn!" Cavanaugh said again. But Maddie never took her eyes off Lau.

"We believe the killer may have been a child," Lau said, as gently as she could.

"Madelyn, don't say another word. Go upstairs."

"Where were you this afternoon, Maddie? You didn't go to the rally. You skipped school and went--where? Who did you see?" *Please have an alibi. Jessi doesn't need a friend that badly.*

"At the Pendergasts'. Mrs. Pendergast makes tea. We just talk." Wide, direct gaze, hands open against her thighs. When Lau called Mrs. Pendergast--and Lau *was* going to call Mrs. Pendergast--Maddie's story would check out.

Maddie Cavanaugh's clothes didn't just hide her body; they tried to erase it. And Maddie ignored Deanna Cavanaugh's warnings. Because she didn't trust her mother to keep her safe.

Lau felt the tension run out of her like someone had pulled the plug. *Not a host. Not a gamma. Thank Cavanaugh for her time and go back to hunting what you came for.* It wasn't here. What *was* here might be a law enforcement issue, but Lau had no warrant to look for it. But anger had replaced the adrenaline buzz of the hunt.

And what the hell good were a badge and a gun if you couldn't go after the bad guys?

Lau straightened in her chair. "Maddie, you need to tell someone what's happening to you. You haven't done anything wrong. If someone told you it's your fault, that person is lying to you. Tell Mrs. Pendergast, and ask her to help you tell the school nurse and your doctor and the principal. They'll go to the police. They'll make it stop and get you help."

"What are you talking about?" Cavanaugh's voice was high and thin.

"Maddie, would you leave your mother and me alone now?"

Madelyn looked from Lau to her mother. Then she walked back out through the dining room. The back door closed softly.

"You had no right to question my daughter--"

"Ms. Cavanaugh. I'm a behavioral analyst. A profiler. Do you know what a profiler does?"

"Frighten children? Brainwash them?"

"I'm not what frightens Maddie. Ms. Cavanaugh, you daughter is in terrible pain."

"She acts out. She's just trying to get attention. My husband says--"

"Maddie's being sexually abused." Lau watched the words hit Cavanaugh's perfect façade and crack it. "There are teachers at her school who suspect it. Other children suspect. I'm legally bound to report it, and I think Maddie will speak up. When that happens, if you're smart, you'll already be on Maddie's side."

Cavanaugh stared, her carefully-maintained face forgotten at last. Lau wasn't really there for her, she knew. What was passing before Deanna Cavanaugh's eyes were the things she'd seen and not seen, the evidence she'd insisted on reading as proof of something else. Her husband loved his daughter. He was so caring. They were always close.

"Oh, God. No," Cavanaugh groaned, the earthquake grinding of a life as it fractured and slid.

Lau left the perfect Cavanaugh house, walked past the expensive sedan, and stopped at the curb to look back. Enough pain under the mask to break minds and hearts. But not to make a gamma. Not yet. She had to let the rest of the world do this job, because it couldn't do hers.

She pulled out her phone to update the team.

*

...Despite this initial injury and complicating factors, it is the opinion of this pathologist that the thoracic wound was not the immediate cause of death.

*

Daphne didn't think Brady was surprised to find he had company in the bullpen when he came back an hour after sunset. The corner of his mouth curled up just a little when he saw her poring over Frost's new and improved autopsy reports. Chaz hunched at his monitor doing something baffling with timetables, maps, and school attendance records. Hafidha, Daphne knew, was in her cave spinning electronic straw into gold.

It might be Brady and Lau taking point on this one, but the team was there to back them, because the team was always there.

Brady smelled of rain and cold coffee and cold wet car and very faintly of blood, which made her think he must have brushed a cuff or coatsleeve through it without realizing. He threw his saturated raincoat over the back of his desk chair, and said, ostensibly to Chaz but in actuality to the room at large, "It's coming down out there like a pissing mare. Did Lau call in with the Cavanaugh interview? Is there any fucking coffee?"

Chaz seemed to be too deep in his calculations to notice, so Daphne answered. "She says dead end. She's going to do some more families and then find a hotel."

Chaz looked up at Brady and frowned. "Like a what? And I think there's coffee." He glanced back at his screen. "Oh, damn it." He began to type again as if whatever was wrong was the keyboard's fault.

Brady raised his eyebrows at Worth, but all she could do was shrug back. Chaz was hyper-aware of everyone's coffee needs. And he always snickered when Brady came out with a cowboyism. In fact, he usually paid attention, period. Whatever was on his monitor must bother him more than a little. If so, they'd hear about it eventually.

"I'll go surveil the coffee," she said. She had the next desk to Brady's, anyway. She'd worked places where she wouldn't fetch and carry for the local grumbly self-absorbed male, but those were places where the local grumbly self-absorbed male actually expected her to fetch and carry. And

after the initial shock of his presence, she'd noticed something about Daniel Brady. He might have torn her a new asshole on her second day on the job, but since then, he'd also made a point of snagging her coffee cup every time he got up to fill his own, and without being told, he'd noticed how she took it.

So it was reciprocity, and not really a bribe. Even if, when she came up to where he slumped in his desk chair, she set the cup down by his elbow, cleared her throat and said, "May I ask a totally inappropriate question?"

He looked up, ran his left hand through water-spiked hair, and yawned. "My defenses are down. What the fuck."

It sounded like permission. She lowered her voice anyway. "When did you figure it out? I mean, it took me forever. College, I didn't know what I wanted. There was this guy-- your prototypical lying sack of shit. So then I thought, okay, men are scum, maybe I'll try girls." She shrugged. "Finally figured out I liked, you know, people. Specific ones. And I was fussy about it. And I just... wondered what it was like for you."

His eyebrow arched. Just one. He might have learned the trick from Hafidha.

Coming out stories. The *Where were you when the Shuttle blew* of the queer set. Daphne bit her lip on laughter, but couldn't keep back a flicker of smile. She hoped it was encouraging rather than creepy. Or pained.

And still, Brady looked at her, lips pursed, full wattage stare that hadn't lost its power to make sweat break out across her palms even though she knew he wasn't interested. He was hard to look at and talk to at the same time. The face was too distracting. She wondered if being Danny Brady meant thinking the world was full of people who avoided eye contact.

She could feel him considering the flip dismissal, and wondered what it was that made him answer in even tones, "No. I knew in high school. You ever see *Heathers*?"

Daphne nodded. "I love my dead gay son?"

"I *laughed*. Couldn't stop laughing. Oh God. I could just hear my dad's voice saying that line. If he ever found out, I knew I would rather be dead."

It's the culture, Danny, she wanted to say. *The only good queer is a tragically loveably dead queer.* But you couldn't say something like that to

Brady. He'd just shrug, like it didn't have any bearing on him. So she said, "Yeah. Coming out to my dad was an experience. I think he blames my mom."

"She dressed you like a boy?" He was teasing. Teasing was good. It meant she hadn't blown the fragile connection.

"She died when I was in high school," Daphne said, because there were times for bald honesty. He flinched, but it was a sympathy flinch, not rejection. Feeling greatly daring, she brushed his shoulder with the side of her hand. "So you're not out to your family?"

He shook his head, a piece of copy paper crumpling in his hand. "I dunno. Seemed like it would be selfish to make him see that about me. Cruel." He glanced aside, thoughtfully rather than backing down, but it enabled her to look at his face again. When he lifted his gaze, she held the eye contact by force of will. "Michael Tolliver and me. I've never kissed a girl. Well, okay, kissed. Didn't like it. Too squishy. Smelled funny."

Daphne said, "I'm shocked."

"That I've never been attracted to women?"

"No, that you read *Armistead Maupin*. Hello. 360 of my mental image, man."

"Hey!" His sharp bark of laughter drew Chaz's attention; across the aisle, Chaz swiveled awkwardly from his ongoing argument with his computer and raised his eyebrows.

Brady took a deep breath. Daphne recognized the expression of a man preparing to brazen it out. "You know how many sympathetic novels about *faggots* you found in a Dallas public library in 1989?"

That made Chaz wince. Daphne shot him a sympathetic glance, but his attention was on Brady.

Brady shook his head. "Actually, I got into theatre to meet guys. It seemed like the natural place."

Chaz frowned, maybe at the stereotype. "Did it work?"

A broad-shouldered shrug, like a mountain settling its coat. "Met tons. All of them had joined to meet girls." He grinned. "College was better, though."

"Theatre?" Daphne asked, because--all irony aside--she knew a cue for a straight man when she heard one.

Brady shook his head, clipped hairs glinting at the nape of his neck. "Hell, no." Slowly, and with relish, he drawled: "*ROTC*."

*

Brady hated being this tired. It made him want to drink, or talk, or play twenty-questions head games with himself. It made him want to give up and let someone else try to do the right goddamn thing every waking minute.

If he hadn't been tired, he'd have figured out a nice way to dodge Worth's interrogation. Not fair--that wasn't what it was. Worth made connections, compared notes. That was how she did the job, sure, but she hadn't made an UNSUB of him. Without knowing it, she'd invited him into the company of people who didn't mind talking about themselves.

And damned if he hadn't taken her up on the invitation. And lived. Maybe tired was good for something besides telling you to knock off for the night.

The phone on Brady's desk buzzed; the display identified a call from Hafidha's extension. He hit the speaker button without lifting his head from his other hand. "You're on the air."

"We got a match on the Smith & Wesson," she said, without preamble. "It belonged to a Raymond Grossman, Captain, U.S. Army, retired. He's deceased. No record of a current owner."

"Grossman," Brady said. Adrenaline washed the fuzz from his head. He pushed back in the chair. "Wait. Hollister--one of the vics--was involved in a hunting accident with a *Colonel* Grossman. The captain's son?"

Hafidah hummed six notes of the *Jeopardy* theme. "Accidental deaths for two hundred. Colonel Henry Grossman. That's him."

Brady hung up and waved in the general direction of Chaz and Worth. "Somebody call Lau, tell her she's got to interview the Grossmans in the morning. Chaz--"

Chaz was hunched forward in his chair, arms crossed on the desk, his forehead on his knobby wrists. Brady sighed. "Kid, for chrissake. Go home and sleep."

Chaz muttered something Brady couldn't make out. Chaz's keyboard was pushed back to make room for his arms; a file folder, pinched between it and the monitor, bowed upward.

"You okay?" Brady asked.

"Yes." Not loud, but enunciated fiercely. A drop of sweat trickled out of Chaz's hair and disappeared into his collar. Then another.

"Sure, you are." Brady stood up.

Chaz pushed himself upright, but his arms slipped, and shoved the keyboard farther. It bumped into his coffee mug. His left hand shot out, too far, too fast. The mug spun off the desk.

It bounced, trailing coffee across the carpet. Chaz leaned to reach for it, to stand. He clutched the edge of the desk. His chair rolled backward.

Brady caught him under the arms just before he lost his grip.

Chaz began, "I'm--"

"Fine, yeah," Brady finished, and lowered him to the floor.

Chaz's face shone with sweat; his hair stuck to his forehead. His eyes were closed tight as fists and his breath hissed through his nose, hard and measured. The pulse in his neck jumped as if he'd been running. His right hand rose, trembled, dropped.

"Shit," Chaz whispered. "Shit shit shit."

Brady yelled, "Worth!" He couldn't reach the phone to dial 9-1-1 and she'd been right there a second ago, hadn't she? Chaz, propped on Brady's knee, faded and clammy and cold, weighed less than one of Brady's boots and was most definitely *not* okay or he wouldn't have put up with lying helpless in the aisle for half a fucking second.

He heard Worth behind him. "Oh. Oh, *damn*." He felt her running steps through the floor, heard the fridge door bang open in the kitchenette.

Chaz's eyelids stopped squeezing, but stayed closed. "Chaz, come on, man," Brady said. Stupid. What did he expect that to do?

Worth knelt on the carpet beside Chaz. She had a carton of orange juice and a glass, and poured from one into the other with her whole concentration.

Brady watched her, because she was temporarily oblivious to him, and because it beat the hell out of looking down at Chaz, wet and gray and skeletal, panting irregularly as if all his internal rhythms had been scrambled.

"Chaz, are you awake? Worth said. Her voice was steady and firm, the sort of voice you had to return an answer to. Medics and officers.

Chaz's lips parted, slow and sticky. "Yeah. I-- Yeah." He didn't sound scared or hurt; he sounded as if he was a long way away, and none of this was about him.

"Good. Stay awake for me. I need you conscious so you can swallow. Can you do that?"

Brady felt Chaz's head tense against his hand. But nodding seemed to be too much work. "Yeah."

It was a little like the last time Brady had been present when Worth saved Chaz's life. *At least then I got to be useful and shoot something*.

Worth looked from the glass to Chaz. "Crap." She bolted for her desk, came back with a plastic straw that still dripped frou-frou iced coffee drink. She dropped it in the orange juice and pressed the end to Chaz's mouth. He didn't seem to recognize at first what it was. But Worth said, "Drink," and he did.

Low blood sugar. Why had Brady only just now figured it out? A friend in the Highway Patrol had told him once about a traffic stop. He'd thought the driver was drunk or high--irritable, shaky, sweaty, his attention wandering. Turned out he was a diabetic whose blood sugar had dropped.

Chaz was always eating--and burning through what he ate damned near as fast as he could chew it. Brady felt like an idiot for not seeing the possible consequences.

Worth refilled the cup and put the straw back in Chaz's mouth. From the way he sucked the O.J. down, Chaz was recovered enough to know what was wrong and how to fix it. Then why the hell had he let it happen in the first place? Brady muzzled himself before he said so. Standard tough-guy response: get angry so no one knows you were scared.

Other standard tough-guy response: when caught in a moment of weakness, reject anything that had a passing resemblance to sympathy and avoid all the

witnesses. Brady looked down at Chaz's closed eyes and knew what was going on in there. Funny to think of the kid as a tough guy, but he was. Tough and proud and prickly.

When Worth filled the cup a third time and held the straw up, Chaz pulled his head back a little. "I'm going to slosh."

"Good. I don't tend to have a syringe of glucagon on me nowadays. You good to sit up yet, if I hang onto you?"

Chaz still looked like hell, but at least he looked like Chaz looking like hell. "Mm. Finish the juice."

Worth was prepared to help, but propping Chaz against the side of his desk was no big deal. Brady felt how stiff he was even through his jacket. All Chaz's muscles saying, "I can do it myself," except they couldn't, just then. Without thinking, Brady said, "Sorry."

Chaz gave him an unreadable glance, which seemed like all he had the energy for.

Worth said, "I've got a tuna sandwich in the fridge, and there's a quart of milk in there, I think. Would you get them for me?"

When Brady came back with the milk and the sandwich, Chaz was the right color again, and strong enough to blot sweat off his face with a tissue that left bits of stray white fiber in his lame excuse for five o'clock shadow. It seemed to require all his attention.

No, Chaz was just stalling until he could figure out what expression to use when he looked up, what easy, dismissive, no-big-thing speech to give them.

Brady almost laughed. He'd been trying to decide what the witness ought to say in a case like this. Two halves of the same problem. He held up the milk carton and said gravely, "It's got Duke's name on it. Don't expect me to lie for you when he comes looking, man."

Surprise, and a smile, and a jerk of his head at Worth. "Uh-uh. It was Daph's idea."

She unwrapped the sandwich and handed it to Chaz. "So, hypoglycemic unawareness?"

He swallowed the first enormous bite. "Not *un*. It has to get pretty low before I feel it, though."

"So by the time you noticed, you couldn't stand up. What were you going to do, raise your serum glucose by sheer force of will? Why didn't you just say, 'Yo, bring me some carbs?'"

Chaz glared at the sandwich and took another bite. "Impaired judgment."

It seemed Worth had tough-guy coping mechanisms, too. Brady couldn't tell her to lay off without making Chaz even more self-conscious. Any day that included involuntarily sitting on the floor in the workplace was probably already not a self-esteem builder.

What would he want in Chaz's place? Necessary help, and afterwards, business as usual. Maybe Chaz would want something else. Well, if so, Brady would find out.

Chaz sent the sandwich to its doom and downed half the carton of milk before he gave Worth one of his flat-mouthed grimaces. "Sorry. That was your dinner."

"She can send out for pizza and not give you any," Brady said. He put his hand out. "Help up?"

"Yeah." Not at all like the last time he'd said it. Brady felt the knot in his stomach dissolve.

Chaz's hand was cool and dry now. As Brady levered him up, Worth watched like a hawk over a rodent hole, ready to pounce if Chaz wobbled. Chaz dusted himself off--the human equivalent of a cat washing after falling off something--and said, "Bathroom. Be right back." He shot a look at Worth and added, "Really."

"I know." She scrambled up off the floor. If Worth had stopped worrying, Brady figured he could, too.

"If you're not back in five," he called after Chaz, "I'm phoning the Grossman tip to Lau. And you'll have missed your chance."

"Hah!" Lame comeback, but it would do.

Chaz threaded between the desks, cautious but still quick, and disappeared through the kitchenette.

The suspect fled the scene, Brady thought. *I can sympathize with that*.

Act IV

The next morning, Brady was just putting his coffee on his desk when his cellphone rang--three short, three long, three short. He thumbed the green button and pressed it to his ear, already knowing what came next. "Brady."

"Hello, Agent Brady. This is Madeline Frost."

Of course it was. Either Frost didn't believe in caller I.D., or she'd been taught telephone etiquette at age eight by a nun with a ruler. And even over the phone, her voice was still identifiably affectless and metallic and unmistakably hers.

Brady drew a fortifying breath. "Dr. Frost. What did you find?"

"It looks like a duck and walks like a duck," Frost replied, "but it quacks like a wolverine."

"Excuse me?" Brady said.

There was a pause. He knew the look Frost wore at that exact second, as clearly as if they were face to face, and what it conveyed: *Why do you even bother to get out of bed in the morning if you're going to be this stupid?*

She said, "You can't find the bullet because there isn't one. There never was."

He glanced around the bullpen. Hafidha was in her sanctum, but no one else had arrived yet. "Are you still working, Doctor Frost? Do you mind if I come to the theatre?"

"I'd prefer you did not." Which was what he had expected her to say. "But if you must, yes, there are certain aspects of this I could demonstrate more efficiently firsthand. I understand the case is time-sensitive. Can you be here promptly?"

Which, Brady suspected, was Frost for, *Somebody is still out there killing people. Maybe you could get your overmuscled ass in gear?*

"I'm leaving now," Brady said.

"I'll delay dissecting the heart until you get here," Frost answered. "Goodbye, Agent Brady."

As he shrugged on his raincoat, Brady wondered, *Was that Madeline Frost's idea of a joke?*

*

Lau eyed the Grossman home from the street and wondered how many dissimilar lives Brattonville could hold. This had been a farmhouse on the edge of town before suburbs were invented. It was never as grand as the Cavanaughs' mock Tudor; once it might have been the equivalent of the Henleys' pretty Colonial.

Now it had sprouted a surrounding neighborhood, ranch houses and sidewalks and streets with "Lane" in the name, like a dead tree hosting a crop of mushrooms. Its white paint was chalking. The gutter downspout was missing on the front right corner, and the rain had pounded a muddy hollow beside the foundation there.

The lawn was green because lawns in Maryland mostly were, not because it got fussed over it spring and fall. But someone was keeping it mowed. A big maple showed around the back of the house, and two spindly birch trees marked the edge of the lot in front.

Lau stepped up onto the wide low porch and rang the bell. She heard it chime inside.

The woman who came to the door was tall, big-bosomed, with muscled forearms, thin lips in a long face, and brown hair gone two-thirds gray in swathes. She wore it in a chin-length page boy clamped back with two plain steel barrettes. She'd probably worn it that way when she was twenty.

Now Carol Grossman was 58, according to Hafidha, and employed in the high school cafeteria kitchen for the past five years. Five years ago, her son's wife left him; Carol Grossman would have needed a job that let her be home when her granddaughter got out of school. Two years later, that was her *orphaned* granddaughter. Staff Sergeant Ethan Grossman caught a sniper's bullet in Iraq.

"Ms. Grossman?"

"Mrs." Grossman tucked her chin to be able to look at Lau through the tops of her bifocals. "I think they still call widows that."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau. May I come in?"

Mrs. Grossman nodded and stepped aside.

Lau found herself at one end of a long central hall. At the other she could see the white-painted newel post of the stairs to the second floor. A pair of panel doors stood open on her left into a dining room barely large enough for the table and six chairs and the corner cupboard. The tablecloth was sun-faded on the top, and a cobweb looped from the hanging light overhead to the ceiling.

On the right was an equally cramped living room. It looked as if Carol Grossman had moved into her in-laws' era: the old television on the circa-1960s rolling cart, the electric fireplace that did nothing but make the flowery upholstered furniture hard to arrange. In the back wall another door stood closed.

The kitchen would be beyond the dining room; the light that banded the far end of the hall must be from the kitchen window. What was the back room on the right, behind the living room, with its doors shut?

A slender figure--a girl--stepped into the hall from the kitchen and stood sidelit in the bar of cloud-dimmed sun. Her long brown hair hung straight and limp over the shoulders of her puff-sleeved white peasant blouse. Her calves and feet showed bare below her too-big plaid skirt. Both her hands were visible and empty.

"Grandma?" The girls's voice was high and hesitant.

"You ready for school?" Mrs. Grossman said, as if she knew the answer.

"I just wanted to see--"

"Do your duty, Melinda, everything else takes care of itself."

I need two of me, Lau thought. *No, I need Brady.* If Melinda Grossman was their gamma, she knew the FBI was at the front door. If she wasn't the gamma, there was a good chance it was someone she knew. Someone she might want to warn. Lau had intended to interview Mrs. Grossman alone, but she couldn't let Melinda out of her sight.

"I'd like to speak to both of you, actually," Lau said. She pumped warmth into her voice, and TV-human-interest-reporter, and turned her hands palms-up and soft to gesture at Mrs. Grossman and Melinda. *Who, me? FBI? Just public liaison. I'm here to calm your fears*.

"Melinda's got school--"

"I'll make it all right with her teachers." Lau smiled a dazzling conspiratorial smile--she hoped--at Melinda. "I won't keep you long."

Mrs. Grossman stepped into the living room. Melinda stood, opening and closing her hands at her sides.

There had to be a back door. If Melinda was a gamma, she would run. Or she would attack Lau, somehow. Her hands were empty, but did she need a weapon? The gun hadn't been fired.

Or she'd follow her grandmother into the living room and wait for her chance.

If she wasn't a gamma, she might still do any of those things.

Lau smiled at Melinda and tilted her head toward the living room. "I hope first period isn't your favorite. You go to Corbit Heights?"

Melinda took a step toward her, another. Her skirt had twisted so the front seam was off-center. She shrugged with one shoulder. "English. It's okay."

Was her skirt loose enough to twist because she liked to wear it low on her hips, or because she'd lost weight? There were so many normal reasons teenagers lost weight. "Mr. Givens's class?"

Melinda stepped the rest of the way down the hall, delicate as a deer, and looked into Lau's face. "You met him?"

Lau nodded. She didn't add to it for fear of turning the subject the wrong way. Because for some reason, Melinda was *interested* in this.

"Do you think he might be sick or something?"

The jolt of surprise didn't make it to Lau's face, because she was *good*, damn it. "I don't know."

Melinda frowned, pursed her lips; worry, not dislike or revulsion. "I thought...since he didn't serve. My dad said the recruiters won't take people who've got things wrong with them."

She thought she'd have trouble getting Melinda to open up. "My brother did eye exercises, he was so afraid he'd get nearsighted and be turned down."

"Your brother was in the Army?"

"Air Force. All three of my brothers and my dad."

"They're all alive?"

Melinda's father, her grandfather, the great-grandfather who died before Melinda was born. Was she trying to imagine it, a house full of soldiers? Did she imagine herself the center of their world, or they as the center of hers? And which did she want?

"Come and sit, Melinda," Mrs. Grossman called from the living room. "Agent Lau has work to do."

Mrs. Grossman occupied one end of the sofa. Melinda sat at the other. *Their usual spots*, Lau thought. She half-reached for the painted Windsor chair near the door--easiest to move. But that was the chair any un-guest would take. Salesman. Evangelist. An officer come to deliver bad news.

Lau slid the upholstered ottoman away from the end of a chair and in front of the TV and sat on it, across the coffee table from the Grossmans. She leaned forward, elbows on knees. Now her head was lower than either of theirs.

"I'm sure you know what happened at the middle school yesterday afternoon." Talk to Mrs. Grossman. Watch Melinda. Mrs. Grossman could never have climbed into that treehouse. But Melinda was Lau's height, and weighed less.

"That someone shot Brian Newman. Terrible thing. Melinda was there. All the school children were. You'd have to be a monster to do that in front of children."

"There was a gun recovered at the scene."

Melinda's head jerked up. Then her gaze dropped to her lap. An instant later she looked up at Lau again. *Too late to look innocent, hon*, Lau thought. If Melinda wasn't the shooter, she knew who was. She knew who'd had the gun.

Melinda Grossman didn't seem like a gamma--but what did that mean?

"That's good, isn't it?" said Mrs. Grossman. "They'll catch the man, then."

Lau pressed her palms together in front of her. It signaled concern; it said, "We're together in this." "It was a Smith and Wesson revolver registered to

the late Captain Raymond Grossman. Was that your father-in-law, Mrs. Grossman?" Carol Grossman stared. Lau added, "Did he have a revolver like that?"

"You made a mistake. It's not his gun."

"I don't think so."

"It's right here. It's in my room." Mrs. Grossman flung up her left hand, as if tossing something over her shoulder, toward the closed door behind her.

"May I see it, Mrs. Grossman?" And all the time Lau watched Melinda, who flushed, turned pale, flushed again, her fingers rolling the hem of her blouse, her eyes everywhere but on her grandmother or Lau.

You don't know what she's capable of. A joke, when she'd said it to Brady. Now it was true.

Mrs. Grossman stood, crossed the room, opened the door. The bed was directly opposite, decked in a brown-and-beige comforter, pillow shams, bedskirt. Bed in a bag. The orange carpet, faded and flattened, belonged to the decade of the TV cart. She turned right once in the room, and the door blocked her from where Lau sat.

At the corner of her eye Lau could see Melinda, motionless. *Don't look at her. Don't push her*.

"Melinda!" Mrs. Grossman snapped. Melinda rose as if the sofa had pushed her off, stood between it and the coffee table, and watched the bedroom door.

Mrs. Grossman stepped back into sight, gripping the edge of the open door. "Melinda, did you take it?"

Melinda's voice cracked when she said, "I didn't touch it!"

"May I see where it was?" Lau beckoned to Melinda to go in first. After a wild-eyed moment, Melinda went.

It was a shrine, like the *ofrendas* Mexican families made for departed loved ones on Day of the Dead. This one was permanent. Mrs. Grossman had spread a crocheted lace runner across the top of an old Deco-style dressing table, and laid her memories out on it, taped them to the tall oval mirror.

Photos on the glass, formal portraits and snapshots, of Raymond Grossman solemn in World War II dress uniform, in his officer's field jacket, one on the occasion of his retirement when his hair was white. His son Henry, Carol Grossman's husband, in a formal photo in uniform with his colonel's insignia, snapshots from Vietnam, one of him graying, uniformed, beside a shining new car. Henry again, out of uniform--but next to his son Ethan, Melinda's father, and Ethan wore dress uniform and the brutal haircut of boot camp, and both were smiling. Ethan again, in desert camo, leaning on the flank of a Humvee.

On the table top, dried flowers from funeral wreaths, rank insignia, dogtags, discharge papers--or in Ethan's case, official notice of his death in action. The pistols. A .45 caliber M1911 for Henry Grossman; a Beretta M9 for his son. The sidearms of their respective wars. And an empty space, its outline faded into the lace, for the Smith & Wesson revolver.

None of the men in the photos had his arm around a wife, a sweetheart, a daughter. The world on the mirror was a world without women.

It was a world without civilians. Its people lived in uniform or not at all.

Lau fought back a shiver. Why hadn't she spotted this in the living room? The time-capsule amenities were good enough for the living. It was only the dead whose needs had mattered. Now they had no needs. Now nothing changed in the Grossman house.

"Melinda." Mrs. Grossman's voice was high and thin, as if she couldn't draw enough breath.

"I *didn't take it*."

"I told you never to touch these things. *Never*."

"Grandma, you're away all day. You don't lock the back door. I bet everybody knows there's guns in here." Melinda was red-faced, her breath hard and uneven, as if she wanted to cry.

Mrs. Grossman stood between Melinda and the guns. Lau took a chance, laid her hand lightly on Melinda's shoulder. Melinda shuddered, but stood still. "It's all right. What happened in the gym when Brian Newman was shot, Melinda?"

"He walked up on the stage and everybody's cheering and clapping, like he'd won the whole war by himself. And then--bang, he fell, somebody said he was dead--" Melinda stopped on a swallow of air and looked down.

Lau's hands were cold; her pulse was was bass-drumming in her ears. ""Did you see anyone with a gun?"

"No. But it-- Somebody shot him. Somebody must have snuck in and taken the gun and shot him."

"Not with the Captain's gun," Carol Grossman said sharply. "It won't fire."

Melinda stared at her grandmother, her mouth hanging.

"Firing pin's broken," Mrs. Grossman added.

If Melinda was the gamma, she would know the gun didn't work, wouldn't she? But the gun at the gym hadn't been fired.

Melinda's shoulder trembled under Lau's hand. She took a step back, for balance, to get away--Lau couldn't tell. "I didn't break it," Melinda whispered.

"Ethan broke it off. Your father. He said the gun wasn't safe."

"No." Melinda shook her head. She squeezed her eyes shut, but tears leaked out the corners still. "It wasn't safe."

The girl wobbled; Lau helped her to the foot of the bed. Melinda sat as if she'd never have the strength to stand again.

"Melinda didn't shoot anybody." Mrs. Grossman looked pleased; she'd been right all along. "She just took the gun. I'll have to punish you for that right enough, Melinda. But this isn't a police matter."

Lau managed the bright smile again; she felt as if she were dragging it up out of the ground through her feet to get it all the way up to her mouth. "Then it's all right, Melinda. I'll just let the sheriff's office know what you've both told me, check to see if there's anything else they need to know. Sorry to take your time like this."

Melinda nodded, blank-faced. Mrs. Grossman said, "Phone's in the kitchen."

Lau patted her pocket. "Cell phone. I've got them on speed dial." Because she didn't want to make this call where the Grossmans could hear.

She called the sheriff's office first, and told Deputy Raintree to send backup. Then she thumbed in Brady's number. Inside the house she heard Mrs. Grossman's voice rise, warming up to a thorough tongue-lashing.

"Where are you?" Brady said. She hadn't known how keyed up she was until she heard his voice. Reaction made her shake.

Melinda's higher voice answering back, barely audible, and Mrs. Grossman again.

"I just talked to the Grossmans. It's circumstantial--"

"But you think it could be Melinda."

She was about to say yes when memory played back Melinda's words: *And then--bang, he fell, somebody said he was dead...*

"Brady, it's Melinda. *She heard the shot*."

The argument had stopped.

Brady was saying something as she cut off the call and drew her pistol. She sprang onto the porch, put her back against the wall by the door. "Melinda?"

A harsh, wet, hissing sound.

Lau peeked around the doorframe. The door in the hall that let onto Mrs. Grossman's bedroom was open. At the far end of the hall, the light was brighter. As if an outside door stood open.

Be cautious, she thought, and ignored the thought, flying through the cramped living room to the door behind the sofa.

Mrs. Grossman lay just inside the door, scrabbling weakly at her chest with both hands. Blood spread across her blouse under her fingers, into the orange carpet under her. A faded outline showed on the lace runner where the M9 had lain.

"What is your emergency?" said a voice in her ear. Cellphone. 9-1-1. When had she done that?

Mrs. Grossman died as Lau snapped instructions to the dispatcher. *I left them alone. I left her here*.

Lau bolted into the hall, pistol at high ready, sidled along the wall. Back door standing open. The back yard was bordered in overgrown lilacs, and the

big maple's trunk was easily wide enough for a thin girl to hide behind.

A girl with a gun who never missed.

*

You're not supposed to cry in front of people, but you can't stop the tears and snot dripping down your face. Bad enough that Grandma's here, but the FBI lady saw you too. It's nobody's rule--nobody's duty--but your own; you have to be strong, be proud, like Daddy. But you've already broken all the other rules, so why not this one too? Daddy isn't here to be disappointed anymore.

Grandma's still tearing into you, but you can hardly hear her over your own sniffling and the gun's constant rising mutter. No, it didn't abandon you, just like it promised. But you wish it would leave you alone just for a minute, just to let you think--

Grandma's hand closes hard and heavy on your shoulder, gives you a little shake. "Are you listening to me, Melinda Jane?"

"All of you leave me alone!"

You flinch as Grandma's scowl deepens. You think she's going to slap you for sure, but instead she crosses her arms tight under her chest. "You mind your tone, young lady. And go wash your face--there's company here. What is that woman going to think of you?"

You scrub a hand across your face and clench it in your skirt, leaving a slimy-wet smear behind. What would she think? No taller than you, but so pretty, so sleek, with her nice clothes and shiny hair. She wears a gun like any soldier. Did anyone ever tell her she couldn't? That guns aren't for girls. That guns are too dangerous.

"Why would you even care?" Your voice cracks once, but anger steadies it. "You never cared what Mom thought. You sure don't care what I think. All you've ever cared about is them*." One hand jerks toward the mirror and all the staring faces; your watch slides too-loose against the bones of your wrist.*

"That is enough! You wash your face and go to your room. We'll talk about this when you remember your manners." She shakes her head once, sharp and angry. "What would your father think of you like this?"

Your eyes blur again and you can't tell if it's tears or the hot rage rising in your head. You're on your feet before you realize it. The carpet swallows the sound of your bare foot stomping. "It doesn't matter! He's dead! He's dead and so's Grandpa and all the rest of them. They're dead and it's just you and me and why can't you ever admit that?"

Too blurry-eyed to see the blow coming in time. The sound of her palm on your cheek is as loud as any gunshot, and the strength of it staggers you and sends you stumbling against the dresser.

"Melinda--"

She sounds surprised, maybe even sorry, but it doesn't matter any more. Your sweaty tear-sticky hand lands on your father's pistol. Black and shiny, the hatched grip rough against your palm. It fits just as easily as the revolver did. Your father may have broken that one, but this one will work just fine.

"They're dead." Your voice is soft and steady now. "It's just you and me."

The trigger moves like water under your finger. And then it's just you. You and the gun.

*

Brady knew the way to Autopsy Pathology, and Frost had left instructions that he be admitted to the theatre. He stood well back, nonetheless. The reek of raw lamb didn't bother him, but there was something about dumpy little Dr. Frost, her plump small-boned hands elbow-deep in a dissected corpse, her cherubic cheeks behind the Plexiglass face shield, that made Brady feel like at any moment he could be the next demonstration to cross her table.

The meat scales, slimed and sticky with blood like something out of *Sweeney Todd*, really didn't help, nor did the way Frost always looked at him, that first glance every single time, like she was thinking about the derrick and crane she'd need to get him on the table.

"I was wishing for another victim," Frost said; her mouth twisted on the word *wishing,* as if it was something it pained her to admit. "Before you called, I was contemplating how much easier it'd be to determine the nature of anomalous effect from a *fresh* autopsy. If one were inclined to superstition, one might say the anomaly was most accommodating."

Brady hesitated. Human outreach, from Dr. Frost? Her way of showing that something--a senseless death--had left her hurt and confused? Or a simple reporting of an interesting coincidence. "How does that make you feel?"

Frost raised her age-softened chin, to see him eye to eye. "Irritated."

"Just think how Brian Newman feels," Brady said before he could stop himself.

Frost snorted. It was the nice thing about Frost--if there was a nice thing about Madeline Frost. She always got the joke, and she never seemed to mind, even if she considered his sense of humor puerile.

Brady shook himself. *Enough comic cross-talk with the Demon Barber.* "You said there wasn't a bullet. But there is a gun."

"Was it fired?"

"The gun we found wasn't. But we think--"

"No."

"Sorry, what?"

"No. There was no gun. Because there was no bullet."

"Entrance and exit wounds," Brady said, because she already thought he was an idiot. Nothing to lose.

"Perfectly lined up," Frost retorted. She raised the body into a sitting position. Brady would have moved to assist her, but she didn't seem to need his help--until she stared over the top of her glasses, at which point he hurried to support the naked body of the deceased. By the shoulders, because his chest flopped open like double doors.

Frost pushed the gaping sides of the Y-incision closed and held them together with one gloved hand. She took a number two pencil from the case clipped to her belt, where it rested beside a blue plastic-handled scalpel, a pair of scissors, and a roll of adhesive tape. "Watch."

Obediently, Brady watched as the bright yellow pencil slid into the circular hole in Sergeant Newman's back. Frost picked up a slender steel rod from her instrument tray and fitted it into the hole after the pencil. Which, obscenely--no longer bright yellow--slid out the circular hole in his chest as

Frost pushed it, without wiggling. It fell without a clatter because it landed in the corpse's lap.

"That's impossible," Brady said. He knew too much about gunshot wounds; even a through-and-through, no matter how aptly named, couldn't travel in a perfectly straight line.

"Yes," said Frost. She almost seemed pleased with him. "Ergo, this man wasn't killed by a bullet. He was killed by a hole manifesting through his body. The *idea* of a bullet, if you will."

"We think the UNSUB's a kid," Brady said.

Frost considered that--not in the least shocked, and Brady would have been surprised if she had been. "Very likely. It is very much the way a child would imagine a gun to work. Point and click."

Brady's phone rang and he went for it, he realized, like a Golden Retriever after a tennis ball. Any excuse to put Brian Newman down. "Brady."

"It's me," said Nikki Lau.

"Where are you?"

"I just talked to the Grossmans. It's circumstantial--"

"But you think it could be Melinda."

Her voice rose. "Brady, it's Melinda. *She heard the shot.*"

"The shot that--" *nobody heard?* he was going to say, but Lau disconnected, leaving him staring at his phone. Lau *never* hung up on *anybody.*

"A problem, Agent Brady?" said Frost.

"I, um." He shook himself. "I'm afraid Agent Lau may have just landed in the middle of something bad. I need to get out there. Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Having looked at the crime-scene reports," Frost said, "I strongly suspect that the UNSUB believes that he or she--"

"She," said Brady. "Melinda Grossman. A classmate of Tommy Wilson."

"Ah. That Miss Grossman believes she has to have a clear line-of-sight in order to 'shoot' her targets. A child's idea of how a gun works."

"Right," said Brady. "That's actually really good to know."

"It's a hypothesis," Frost said.

"Gotcha." He knew she wouldn't have said anything at all if she hadn't been close to positive, and it made sense.

He was almost at the door of the autopsy theatre when his phone rang again. Lau.

"What the hell happened?"

"Carol Grossman's dead. And I don't know where Melinda is. I fucked up."

He didn't like hearing that tone in Lau's voice, flat and just a little too high pitched. He turned and started back toward the table and Frost and the body of Sergeant Newman. "Is it the same M.O.?"

"Shot through the heart," Lau said. "No gunshot. And one of the other guns is missing. Did I mention I *don't know where the host is?*"

"Frost thinks Melinda believes she has to have a clear line-of-sight to kill somebody. So don't give her one." He wanted to say, *It's okay,* but that wasn't proven yet. "Did you say *other* guns?"

"Jesus, Danny, you should see this woman's bedroom. It's like a shrine to the U.S. Military. Three generations of dead men and their guns. We've got the Captain's, but that still left her two to choose from. Oh, and that .45? Mrs. Grossman said it doesn't fire and hasn't for years."

"Well, Frost just explained to me how Sergeant Newman wasn't killed by a bullet, so it makes sense that it came from a gun that doesn't fire."

"What?" said Lau, and that was better. She sounded sharper, more in focus. Also annoyed, but annoyed was good. Annoyed was *thinking.*

Frost looked up at him, eyebrows raised.

"There's a new body," Brady told her. "Should I have them send it here or--"

"I want to see the body *in situ,*" said Frost.

"You *what?*" said Brady.

"Brady, what?" said Lau.

"Nikki, is the scene secure?"

"As secure as a scene can be when there's an active host in the area. I've got cops and a local coroner all over the place, but I'm fending them off for now."

"It, um, it looks like Dr. Frost and I are on our way to you. Don't let them move Mrs. Grossman, okay?"

"Daniel Brady, are you putting me on?"

Not unless Madeline Frost is putting me *on.* "I'll be as quick as I can. Keep to cover."

He hung up the phone, still staring at Frost.

"Really, Agent Brady," she said. "I don't grow in the theatre like a kind of mold."

Act V

Brady pulled into the cracked concrete drive of the Grossman house with Frost silent and self-possessed in the passenger seat. He'd run the party lights under the grille and busted speed limits all the way from Baltimore to Brattonville, so conversation wasn't an issue. Frost seemed perfectly happy with whatever haunted-house company she had in her own head.

Brady's head, in contrast, was not his friend. It had kept feeding him the image of Lau dead of an imaginary bullet. When she stepped out the door onto the Grossman front porch, he had an attack of mixed feelings: *She's okay!* and *She's making herself a fucking target!* At least she'd put her vest on. Would a ballistic vest stop an imaginary bullet? Depended maybe on whether Melinda Grossman believed the "bulletproof" misnomer.

He reached his own vest out of the back seat and pushed it at Frost. "Put this on."

Frost gave him a stare. "Melinda Grossman's victims were males, before her grandmother."

He yanked the vest on, his face hot. Out-profiled by the pathologist. *Jesus, Danny, show up to play.*

He followed Frost up the walk anyway, covering her back, though her short, careful stride drove him nuts.

"Dr. Frost," Lau said. No sign of the agitation he'd heard on the phone.

"Special Agent Lau. Just point out the body, please. You needn't go with me."

Huh. Was that Frost being peculiar, or Frost recognizing that Lau needed to download? He couldn't tell. Behavioral analysis only worked on humans.

Brady stepped into the hall and closed the door, and felt just a little less as if he had a target on his back. He smelled blood, but no lingering bite of burned powder. The other smells he remembered from his great-grandparents' home: potpourri, mothballs. Someone still used mothballs?

Yes. He took in the hall, the half-visible dining room, the living room. Here people still used mothballs. Girls wore pink and played dolls and house. Boys played cowboy and soldier. If he turned that television on, *Gunsmoke* would be airing, and not in reruns.

This was the foundation of Melinda Grossman's mythology.

"She's conflicted." He was surprised to hear his voice, loud in the hall. "She'll only act in the heat of the moment. When she cools down, she's scared, because she lost control. She's ashamed of her anger, afraid of it. Guns, power--they're not for girls. She's rebelling against that, and the anomaly is egging her on." He looked down at Lau, dragged himself back from his vision of Melinda's world. "What makes her angry?"

Lau's eyes narrowed. "First victim to last--there's a progression. Tommy Wilson--Maddie Cavanaugh said he called Melinda's father a coward. Then one remove: Hollinger killed her grandfather. Then she escalates from the personal to the general. She kills the other men because they came home. Her dad didn't."

Brady peered through the living room to the open bedroom door, where Frost squatted beside the body like a patient vulture. He wondered what Grandma had said to Melinda.

That brought him entirely back to the present. "You okay?" he asked Lau.

She bit her lip. "I shouldn't have left them alone together."

"You didn't kill Carol Grossman. You made a call, that nothing was likely to trigger Melinda in the next five minutes, and you made the responsible

decision to call for backup. It should have been fine. It just wasn't. Let it go."

She opened her mouth. He half-expected "Easy for you to say" to come out of it. But she gave a little sharp shake of her head instead. "After Melinda shot her grandmother, she bolted out the back. I lost her in the yard; you could hide linebackers in the goddamn lilac bushes."

For now, she'd tough it out. Brady nodded. "Let's go look."

They passed a kitchen like a faded page from a 1950s *Good Housekeeping*, and the other door to the bedroom, still standing open. Brady looked up the stairs in the back hallway and raised his eyebrows at Lau.

"I cleared it with Raintree and his guys. If she went up there, she can do more than make magic bullets."

That didn't bear thinking about. The back door was closed and locked with an old-fashioned surface-mount box lock. The knob grated when he turned it to shoot the bolt. Damned small towns, where nobody locked the back door.

If Melinda had left any trail through the short grass, the searchers' tracks had spoiled it. He stepped off the stoop and imagined being a twelve-year-old girl afraid of everything, herself most of all. Where would she go?

"No," he said. "This is it. She grew up in this wayback machine, and there's no place else like it. This is the only place she'll feel safe."

"Then we wait for her to come back."

Lilacs, maple tree, and around the foundation, a bed of perennials that had gone to jungle. Daylilies, mildewy phlox, some shrub he didn't recognize. One of the daylily stems was broken and hanging.

Behind it the basement window stood open. Just wide enough for a skinny, desperate twelve-year-old.

"She already has," he said.

*

Lau sensed Brady breathing hard in frustration behind her as they descended the basement stairs. She wanted to explain, to justify her error--we cleared the house and posted uniforms--but she and Raintree had both missed the open window, and when it came to gammas a small mistake could be a final

one. There was no justifying this error, and even if she could, now was not the time.

And kicking herself over it now was a good way to get her or Brady killed. *Mind on the war.*

The lights were on--there was no advantage in darkness when Melinda had known they were coming from the instant they opened the door. She paused on the steps just when her feet would have been coming into view and looked at Brady.

"Left," he mouthed.

Nikki nodded and edged over on the steps so he could come up alongside her, facing in the opposite direction. It felt good to have him at her back, even if the space was narrow. He shifted his weapon to his right hand, drew a telescoping mirror from his coat pocket, and scanned the basement for motion.

At his nod, they moved in tandem. One step down, and then another, crabwise, quiet. Stop before the bulk of your body comes into view and duck beneath the floor for a quick glimpse, semiautomatic at the ready. "Nothing," Brady said.

"Clear," Lau answered, and they moved a few more cautious steps.

A significant portion of Nikki Lau's life had been spent in basements with Daniel Brady. She had yet to develop an appreciation of them, but she had assigned a few categories.This one was clean, cobwebbed a little between the joists, and looked like it wasn't dry in spring. The washer and dryer were elevated on whitewashed shipping palettes; the furnace and boiler had been concealed in a white sheet metal enclosure, to and from which fed mysterious pipes and wires.

"Danny," Lau said. When he turned, she directed his eyes with her gaze.

The sheet metal enclosure on the furnace stood open, a crack easily wide enough for a child to wedge herself into. It was open enough that Lau could see clearly, no one hid inside it now.

"That wasn't like that when we cleared the basement," Lau said.

"Shit," Brady said. "There's an outside door."

She'd seen that before too--deadbolted, painted green, with well-oiled hinges at the top of a short concrete flight. The deadbolt was no longer locked.

She got around us.

"Frost," Brady said, and--all pretense of stealth abandoned--charged back up the stairs.

*

You're not supposed to return to the scene of the crime, but where else can you go? Not to the neighbors', not to Katie's--there's no one to help you now.

The furnace presses cool and solid against your side, your arms and legs all pretzeled up to fit inside the cover. Mud dries itchy on your bare feet, cracks between your toes when you move. Sweat prickles your scalp and back. Outside the morning will be coming on warm and muggy, but the furnace and the cement floor are cold and you can't stop shivering.

Your cheek throbs, already swelling, and you wince as it brushes metal. Your hand aches from clenching the gun, but you don't dare put it down. Your heart echoes, and every breath, every rustle of cloth, every rumble from your empty clenching stomach sounds like a shout. You thought for sure they would find you, but the footsteps and voices died eventually. By the time you opened your eyes, you were alone in the basement.

You're not sure how long you sit there. The light dims while rain splatters on the leaves, then brightens again. Eventually your shivering stops. Your stomach doesn't stop growling, though--so hungry it makes you queasy, makes your head hurt. Your lunch is already packed upstairs, sitting on the counter. You should eat something. Then you can figure out what to do.

The thought makes you feel better. You can't hear anyone moving upstairs. The police must be looking someplace else. You can eat a sandwich and pack a bag and go...somewhere. You'll figure it out.

The gun weighs in your hand. Quiet, for now. You have to put it back. You can't listen to it any more. There's no more angry left in you--you're cold and empty as the furnace.

Go upstairs. Put the gun back. Eat something. You can manage those things. You'll think of something else afterward.

Metal scrapes on cement as you push the cover back and you wince, but no one shouts, no one comes bursting down the stairs. Just you and the gun.

Up the stairs quick and quiet, and you ease the outside door open. The day is hot and sticky, rain still shining on the lilacs. Footprints press the wet grass down--big heavy ones and a few not much bigger than yours. The sound of birds and the neighbor's cat and distant traffic carry through the air--normal everyday noises.

You dart inside quick and ease the door shut, for once not mindful of the mud you're tracking in. The kitchen is empty, your lunchbox sitting on the counter where it always is. You swallow a mouthful of spit and nearly grab it. No--put the gun back first. Discipline.

As you creep toward Grandma's room you hear a sound on the other side of the house--people moving. Panic makes your hands tingle. They're still here. The gun tells you what to do, but you aren't going to listen. You're going to put it back. You're going to follow the plan. Then you can grab your lunch and run.

The hall outside of Grandma's room smells funny--lavender and mothballs like always, but something else too. Like pennies, like meat, and something sweet and nasty under that.

You step through the door and freeze as you see Grandma. You didn't think they'd leave her there-- She's all grey and splotchy, and the orange carpet is splattered dark rusty-brown.

Then you notice the other woman kneeling beside her. Soft-faced and grey-haired, watching you with cool eyes. Something glitters in her hand.

The gun rises in yours before you can even think about it. Inside your head it sings.

*

Brady's back filled the bedroom doorway in front of Lau. She almost ran into him as he stopped short, but managed to keep both her balance and control of her nine millimeter. Brady sidestepped, clearing the door for her, and she came up beside him.

Face to face with Melinda Grossman and her daddy's gun.

Frost still crouched beside Carol Grossman's body, one knee dropped, the other foot planted as if she had been arrested just in the moment of rising. Her right hand rested on the case at her belt, the left one splayed on the floor. Melinda Grossman still held the empty M9 pointed at Frost's chest, but her head had swiveled to focus on Brady. She barely acknowledged Lau's arrival with a sideways flick of her eyes.

Heart shot won't stop a gamma fast enough. Head shot *might* stop them using their manifestation until the blood loss takes them down. Brady trained his pistol right between Melinda's eyes, and Lau did the same.

"Melinda," Brady said, "I'm Special Agent Brady. Daniel Brady. I want you to crouch down to the floor, honey, and put down the gun. We know you didn't mean to hurt anyone. We can help you stop."

The crosshatched grip of Lau's pistol wore at her palms. She thought about the push-pull of her arms, the muscle tension steadying the gun. She slipped her finger inside the trigger guard.

Melinda's pupils seemed to eat away at her irises as if the blue were collapsing into them. A tremor ran the length of her arm; the gun wobbled visibly. "She was doing something to my grandma--"

Brady shook his head. Lau heard the creak of the trauma plates inside his ballistic vest as he breathed in deep, and tried not to wonder if real armor would stop an imaginary bullet. Brady said, "She's a doctor, honey. She was trying to help."

The gun quivered, swung as if it had a mind of its own. Rose to point at Brady's heart, just at Lau's eye level. "You're not a soldier," Melinda said. To her side, Frost dropped her right hand to the floor.

"Madeline, stay down," Lau said, softly. Don't draw the gamma's attention away from Brady. From the movement of Frost's mouth, she knew Lau was using her first name to personalize her to the host, and it amused her. She looked curious, interested. Not frightened at all.

Brady smiled at Melinda. "I was a soldier."

Christ, Danny, don't tell her you were an officer.

"So how come you're not any more?"

"It was before the war," Brady said. "I served. I didn't fight." He shrugged. "I missed it."

She winced. "I'm sorry," she said.

He nodded, as if her sympathy were exactly the right thing. "Your dad fought, didn't he? That's his gun."

Lip bitten, Melinda nodded. Lau saw her gaze flicker over Brady's ballistic vest. The semiautomatic rose in her hand like the head of a snake. Now it pointed at Brady's eye.

That would certainly sidestep any question of body armor.

"Melinda," Brady said. "Honey. We can take care of you. We can make it okay."

"Can you bring my dad back?" Little-girl voice, lost-child voice. The voice of the monster. Almost a whisper, and it squeaked and broke.

Beside her, Frost rose slowly to her feet. "*Madeline*," Lau said, warning.

But Frost leaned forward a little, across Carol Grossman's body, her stubby frame balanced on its toes. Her hands hung by her sides, pressed into her plain tweed jacket. "Melinda," she said. "Look at me."

Frost was only a little taller than Melinda, who was just about Lau's height. Brady loomed over all three of them. And yet, when Melinda turned and stared Madeline Frost in the eye, Lau almost forgot Brady was in the room. Only the line of Melinda's gun reminded her.

"If they brought your father back," Frost said, her face relaxed and curious, an expression Lau had never seen her wear before, "do you think he would be proud of what you've done?"

"The gun--" Melinda said. Her breath came quick and fast, her face paling.

"The gun didn't make you do anything," Frost said. "You killed all those people, Melinda. You did it all yourself. *Do you think your daddy would be proud*?"

"No," Melinda said. Firmly, with resolve, as if coming to a realization. Brady leaned forward against the pressure of the M9 trained on his eye. The floor creaked with the shift of his balance, and Melinda glanced at him. Lau felt

the motion of her own finger on the trigger, arrested it just in time. Because Melinda was lowering her father's pistol, dragging it down Brady's body and off to the side.

"No," she said. "He wouldn't be proud."

With her peripheral vision, Lau caught the flash of silver metal and blue plastic as Frost slipped the surgical scalpel she'd been holding concealed in her right hand back into her beltcase. Brady was already lunging for Melinda as she turned the gun around.

*

Brady slammed his sidearm into its holster, fumbled Melinda's weapon, and peeled her limp fingers from the trigger guard. Some dissociated corner of his mind noticed as he pushed the weapon across the floor that the safety was down and engaged.

Hot, slick, thickening already to stickiness: Brady knew by the flow of red over his hands that he was too late. "Towels!" he said. "Dammit, call 9-1-1." But he could tell from the beeps that Lau was dialing.

Blood pulsed slowly between his fingers. He leaned on the wound, trying to apply pressure, and felt a small hand on his shoulder.

"I am a medical doctor," Frost said, in the tone one would use to calm a small, panicked child. "Agent Brady. My patient, please."

Running footsteps as Lau moved outside. How long before an ambulance came, out here, in a town like this? Did Melinda have a better chance than Madeline Frost?

He lifted his hands off the host's chest, expecting a spray of blood. But there was just the slow well. Frost shouldered him aside. He stood, holding his sticky hands away from his body. "She's not bleeding much."

Melinda still breathed, eyes closed, face graying as if she had been submerged in bleach. But every breath seemed a little shorter than the one before. "She's a gamma," Frost said. "If it's like the others, this is a single puncture wound. It may be possible to save her."

She cocked her head as if listening, turned to the side, opened Melinda's once-white puffy blouse, and pressed her ear to Melinda's bloody chest with

no evidence of squeamishness. A fine line of concentration appeared between her eyes as she shifted her ear to the other side.

Brady moved around her. *Secure the gun.* Sticky with blood; he snapped on a glove before picking it up with his fingertips.

Lau reappeared in the doorway, cell phone in hand, a uniform at her shoulder. "The ambulance is inbound. They say fifteen to twenty minutes. There was a car wreck in the rain, and they're sending the volunteer from one town over." She raised her eyebrows at Brady.

Brady looked down at the women on the floor: one dead, one dying, the third trying to do something about it, arranged in a row as if a set-dresser had tried to balance the room with bloody bodies.

Frost's lower lip bulged with her frown--deep thought, not frustration. "She's breathing on her own. But something's not right. There's almost certainly damage to the heart, and decreased breath sounds. I think she may have a collapsed lung."

Lau crouched beside her, on the opposite side of Melinda. If this were a horror movie, Melinda would open her eyes right now, Brady thought, and lunge up off the floor. But she stayed quiet, each breath tighter and shallower than the last. And in any case, she was harmless without the useless gun.

With one fingertip, Frost poked the side of Melinda's throat. A bulging vein dimpled. "Tension pneumothorax," she said, but she didn't sound certain.

"Can you do anything about it?" Lau reached out to stroke Melinda's blood-sticky bangs off her forehead. Melinda responded with a drawn breath, a small desperate gasp that sounded like it hurt. When the air came out of her again, it came with a tiny puff. Was she entirely unconscious? Brady couldn't tell, but was certain her state of shock was extreme.

"I can try," Frost said. She reached into her pencil case and came up with a scalpel with a blue plastic handle. When she spoke again, she sounded as if she were lecturing, or perhaps reminding herself--disinterested, dissociated. As if she were speaking by rote. "If I'm right, the puncture has created a... flap valve in her lung. When she breathes in, air is forced from the lung into the pleural space. When she breathes out, the valve closes, and the air cannot escape. The resulting pressure is collapsing her lungs."

Brady wanted to cross the room and crouch beside her. But she needed room to work. "What does that mean?"

"It means she's suffocating on her own breath. Agent Brady, I need you to find a ball-point pen, break off the ends, and pull out the ink. I need a tube."

There was a newspaper on the nightstand, folded over to the crossword. But people did crosswords in pencil, didn't they?

People other than Carol Grossman, apparently. A clear plastic pen lay across the page, and Brady started pulling it apart with his teeth before he even turned back. "This isn't sterile," he said.

Frost... *laughed*. And then looked up at him, and he realized she thought he had been making an intentional joke. Her usual expression of irritated disapproval replaced the amusement. "A sterile field is the least of Miss Grossman's problems, Agent. Agent Lau, please restrain the patient's arms."

Lau moved around to press them to the floor. Brady handed the plastic tube over her shoulder, and Frost laid it on the skin of Melinda's chest.

Frost lifted her scalpel in her right hand, felt along the top of Melinda's narrow chest, where the rib bones arched above her childish breasts in their training bra, and placed the point of the blade immediately below Melinda's collarbone. Now Melinda whimpered, as a fresh trickle welled from the scalpel tip, but Lau's strength was sufficient for what little struggle she made.

With expressionless precision, Frost moved the knife several careful centimeters. Blood followed.

Frost slid the pen in below the blade. Blood and escaping air sprayed across Frost's hands, and Frost's and Lau's faces. Only Lau flinched.

Melinda's breaths seemed to come easier. Frost removed the scalpel then, and laid it well aside. When he saw she didn't mean to move again soon, Brady said, "Now what?"

"Now we wait for the ambulance." Her eyes flickered up behind the red spatter across her glasses. "If it makes you feel better, you could go boil water."

Biting her lip, Lau pushed Melinda's hair from her eyes once more.

*

In the absence of emergency personnel and due to immediate threat to the patient's life, this physician made the decision to attempt to relieve the tension pneumothorax.

*

It's not supposed to hurt this much. You thought it would be quick--it always was before. But it seems like you're lying there forever, the carpet sticky beneath you and people shouting all around. Hands on your chest. You can't open your eyes to see, but you hear the soldier's voice, and the FBI woman's, and the doctor's. It hurts to breathe, and you wish they'd leave you alone.

The gun still sings, but you can hardly hear it now. Your hands are empty, anyway.

Hands on your chest again, pressure and more pain and you'd cry if you could, but you don't have the breath. Just leave me alone*, you want to say. You're cold now, and tired, and it* hurts *and you want to rest--*

A hand brushes your hair. Not rough like Daddy's or Grandma's. Soft and small, like you remember Mom's. Maybe she came back for you--

The pain dulls and rolls back as the dark pulls you in. You can't hear the gun anymore.

*

...it is the opinion of this agent that further loss of life was averted by the heroic actions of Dr. Frost.

--Special Agent Nicolette Lau, Federal Bureau of Investigation

*

Injuries to the decedent were insufficient to cause instantaneous death. However, they were exacerbated by a bleed into the pleural cavity caused when this physician's attempt to relieve pressure on the cardiopulmonary system lacerated the decedent's subclavian artery. This bleed is the immediate cause of death.

It is probable that a competent *medical intervention could have saved the victim's life.*

--Madeline Frost, M.D.

*

Author's Note:

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Epilogue

Brattonville, MD, September, 2007

It was still overcast and spitting when Brady followed the stretcher out to the lawn. He found Lau there, watching the paramedics load Melinda's body into the ambulance, and came to stand beside her. Blood stuck her once-glossy hair in dull cords. "Another reason to buy cheap suits," he said, peeling the glove off his right hand.

The ambulance doors slammed. Lau started, as if it was the first sound she'd heard in a long time. "Shit," she said. "It's not supposed to end this way."

"Not your fault, Nikki." He wondered if she believed he meant it. He was pretty sure he did.

She shook her head. She wouldn't cry, not Lau. but he saw the pinch of her eyes. the way her thumb moved to rub blood off the back of her opposite hand. *And all the perfumes of Araby will not sweeten this little hand.* She said, "Maybe she didn't make it a clean shot because she didn't really want to die. Maybe she was still fighting the It." She seemed about to nibble her thumbnail. Brady caught her wrist and pushed her hand away from her mouth before she could notice the taste of blood. She said, "Maybe we could have got this one alive."

Brady swallowed nausea. Her pulse fluttered between the delicate bones of her wrist, thrumming against his fingertips. "Thank you, Stephen Reyes. Are you going to carry all those maybes to your grave?"

She looked at him, startled, eyes wide. He was close enough to see the pupils, contracted and tight despite the day's gray light. He bet his own looked like pinpricks in a map--an old trick for soldiers who wanted their families to know where they were stationed.

She said, "Maybe."

"You need a shower and a coffee--"

He was turning to lead her away when he realized that Frost had materialized beside them. Blood covered her, soaked the knees of her trousers, smeared her arms to the shoulder. She'd cleaned her glasses, but that was her only concession. Standing next to these two made him feel like

a shuffling monster, Sweetums, something out of *The Muppet Show*. As if they were the proper size, so self-contained and tidy, and he was urban sprawl.

Racing mind, trying to come up with anything to distract him. *Shut up, brain.*

Frost looked Nikki Lau in the eyes and said, "It bothers you when it's a child."

Lau might not be able to process her own emotions right this second, but she could bear up for someone else. *I've got you*, he thought. *You've got Frost. Who's got me?*

But that was his job. Tail-end Charlie. Somebody had to be the guy at the end of the line. Nobody had to take care of cowboys. Brady squeezed Lau's wrist lightly and felt the steel come back into her.

She said, "You did everything you could have, Madeline. You did more than you had to."

Frost's eyebrows rose. She studied Lau with an interested frown, as if considering the fatal injury. And then she nodded, shortly, and answered, "Yes. I did."

Providence

Providence, RI, September 2007

Brady had been wondering which of them would crack first, and had almost given up on Worth. But after forty minutes of sitting in the car in near-silence, she finally broke it for something other than a request for a bottle of water.

"New England in late September," she said, draping her wrists over the steering wheel like a trucker. "If you have to follow monsters around, at least some of them live in nice places."

Brady had been reaching between his knees for a water of his own. The seal broke with a ratcheting sensation as he twisted the tepid bottle between his hands. "Damn Yankees," he answered, hoping she could tell his tongue was pressed firmly into his cheek.

She gestured to the oaks and evergreens of the Providence graveyard, to the still-green leaves of a wood of maple trees that held a slope down to the water just visible through their branches. The sun had slid behind the hemlocks that concealed Brady's side of the vehicle. Stars were beginning to prickle out in the cadet-blue twilight. "It's pretty."

Brady drank and wiped beaded water off his lips with the back of his hand. "You really think he'll come out here just to visit a grave?"

"Chaz does. And anyway, it's not just any grave."

"Yeah, it's the grave of some obscure dead horror writer."

"He's a cult figure. If Chaz says the host will come, the host will come. Anyway, live horror writers mostly don't have graves."

Her delivery was totally deadpan, and she got him. He snorted, aspirated water, and began to cough. Without taking her eyes from the approach road, she handed him a paper napkin.

"Point, Worth," he said, when he'd mopped his chest.

She grinned shyly, a quick flicker, and then her attention went back to the gates. She was nerving herself for something; it showed in the ripple of her fingers and the rhythmic tensing of her jaw. He watched out of the corner of

his eyes, and decided to let her decide. Finally, she said, "I killed the first gamma I ever met."

"Excuse me?" As personal confessions went, it wasn't at all what he'd been expecting.

"In L.A.," she said, "you told me to pull the trigger and keep pulling."

He settled back in the passenger seat. "This is about Melinda."

"No." Her hands flattened on the steering wheel. "Yes. But mostly no. But if I'd told you then I'd killed someone, it would have sounded--"

"Defensive?"

Her lip curled. "Weak."

Her profile against the driver's side window gave him nothing.

Brady had rules for himself, a handbook of right action for difficult moments. He didn't demand that anyone else know or follow them. Discovering that Daphne Worth's personal rules also included *No excuse, SIR!* startled him.

"So what happened?" It seemed safer than any of the other questions that occurred to him.

Her cheek hollowed, as if she was sucking on her molars. "When I was a paramedic. We were called to a convenience store robbery. The clerk was gut-shot, but he still pulled the shotgun from under the counter and got the robber in the face and chest. So we had a second ambulance right behind us.

"'We' was Vin Mulhall, Josh Kandinski, and me. We'd been at the station for years. They made fun of my miserable cooking, I made fun of their taste in clothes, we went out drinking. It was..." She shrugged. "We were on the same team."

He knew what that meant.

"The second ambulance took the clerk. They left the robber for us." As she spoke, Worth's palms slid down from the top of the steering wheel to three and nine o'clock, then back up. "We knew our guy wasn't going to make it. He was dead before we got him to the ambulance. But you don't call it at the scene if you don't have to."

Her shoulders curled forward off the seat back, as if she could wrap them around her. She took a deep breath, puffed it out her mouth, and straightened against the upholstery. "We rolled him into the truck and charged the defib." Her lips stretched in a flat, humorless smile. "You can see it coming, can't you? Hello, George Romero! The corpse sat up."

Brady nodded. After it happened, you put distance on it however you could.

"He was strapped to the gurney, but the webbing snapped like old rubber bands. He grabbed Vin by the neck and broke his spine. He reached..." She took another breath. "He just shoved his hand into Josh under his ribcage, like a...like a spoon into ice cream, and..."

She fumbled her water bottle out of the cupholder and drank. Her eyes were on the cemetary approach all the while.

Her voice was steady after that. That was the worst. "He went for my throat. But his hand was slippery. So I slapped the juice on the defib unit up to eleven and put the paddles to his temples."

He waited, to make sure there wasn't more. Of course there was more: the bodies of her friends tumbled like rescue dummies in a disaster exercise, the blood of one of them on her collar, the cop, too late, saying, *Ma'am. Ma'am! Let go!* She didn't have to tell him that part. "You found out what it was?"

"Larry Peretti worked it. The gamma was dead, but somebody had to launder the story. He told me."

"Hell of a way to do the laundry."

It got a little laugh out of her. "Maybe he knew I'd be noisier about it if he didn't."

"Why tell me now?" Out of his mouth, it sounded wrong, as if he disapproved.

She turned a level look on him. Whatever he'd sounded like, she wasn't scared off. She pulled her hands into her lap. "If I'd known a little more than I knew, maybe Josh and Vin would be alive. Maybe they wouldn't. But the thing is, I knew what I knew, and I did what I did. And it was the best I knew to do at the time I did it."

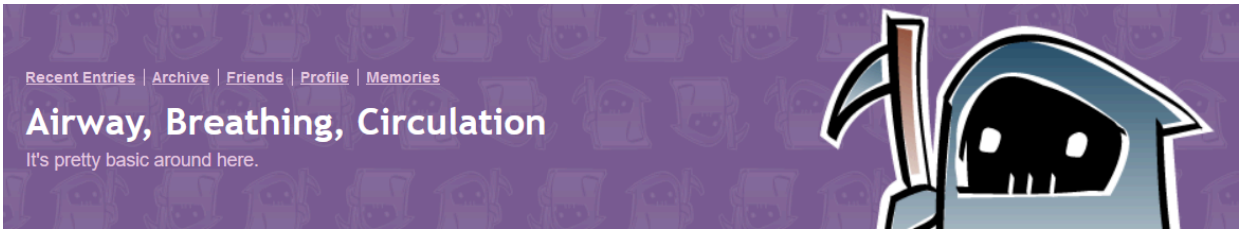
"Oh," he said, and turned back to the windshield. No excuse, sir.

Maybe she didn't think he needed one either. "If Chaz says he'll show, he'll show, right?"

"Sure," she answered. And a moment later, added, "Doesn't mean he'll show tonight."

He finished the water in the bottle. "Pity it's too late in the year for fireflies. We could have a fucking moonlight picnic on the waterside."

Daphne Worth's LiveJournal, Oct. 11th, 2007



Airway, Breathing, Circulation
It's pretty basic around here.

Got your back.

- Oct. 11th, 2007 at 3:26 PM

So I'm down in archives storage (and achoo--what Congressional committee do we talk to to get dusting authorized, let alone digitizing?) when I hear two guys talking outside the door. I'm willing to accept the proposition that they have no idea anyone else is in earshot, but really, think of what these guys do for a *living*. It's sad.

So I'm not paying much attention, rummaging through yucky boxes of icky stories. I hear another set of footsteps coming down the hall. And one of the guys says, "Hey, that new girl you got? I hear the door swings both ways." And two sets of guy giggles.

Then up spake a voice I recognized, and it was meek and mild and butter would not freakin' melt, I swear. And it said, "Don't let it hit you in the ass on your way out." And the footsteps went on down the hall.

My peeps, man.

- Current Mood: loved
- Current Music: Jill Sobule - I Kissed a Girl

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Oct. 15th, 2007

coyote in a sheepdog suit

Oct. 15th, 2007

8:53 PM

Daph says there is no shame in takeout after a day like today, but there sure is a hell of a lot of saturated fat. And yes, no, there is no excuse under heaven for the egg mcmuffins, but I was in a hurry and starving to death and there's a McGreasy's by the Metro station.

Still not enough calories. And I was slamming all day on the pattern rec for that SLC case.

Which *still* may not even be ours.

Starving. Too tired to eat. Going to bed.

I'll make it up in the morning.

- Current Mood: exhausted
- Current Music: The Squirrel Nut Zippers - The Ghost of Stephen Foster

Toolbox

Salt Lake City, UT, October, 2007

"Gah!" Daphne Worth tilted sideways, which was all she had room for, to get her knee out of the soggy spot on the dirt floor of the crawlspace. She turned her pocket flashlight on it, but all she could tell was that, yes, it was wet.

In front of her, Sol Todd craned his head over his shoulder, turned his own light on the spot, and frowned. "Huh." He tipped the light to show the subflooring close above their heads, the stain above the muddy spot. "Given where it is, I think that's seepage from the kitchen sink drain. I think."

Worth tapped a gloved finger into the mud and sniffed cautiously. Wet dirt, which was how the rest of the crawlspace smelled. Not like the little studio off the garage with its tidy worktable and magnifying lamp and racked jeweler's and woodworker's tools. That smelled of three-in-one oil and sanded pine.

All those well-kept tools. Where were the half-finished projects, the mistakes pushed aside, the favorite completed pieces?

Worth dragged her brain kicking and screaming back to the crawlspace. "It's poetic justice. I'm the one who decided the Kansas City Renovator might be one of ours. So it's only right I should be down here on my hands and knees expecting to bump into something icky in the dark."

"Reminds me of the bottom of the cave outside Bogota where Yaron Svoray and I found the remains of a German SS colonel." Todd's voice was relaxed and offhand, but it always was when he said things like that. "Saponified. Never could identify him."

"A Nazi soap mummy. In a cave in Colombia."

"You know what saponification is?" He sounded equal parts surprised and delighted.

"Duke--" She took a slow, dank breath. "Yes."

"A pound of uncut diamonds in the poor bastard's stomach. I don't care how worried you are about the state of Hitler's treasury; that's a silly thing to

do."

Worth knew she was supposed to say something. She was still working on it when Todd's voice came back from the darkness ahead, aggrieved. "You don't believe me."

Her palm came down on a piece of gravel. "Ow. No."

A heavy sigh. "Fully half my vast experience goes to waste that way."

"Of course nobody believes you half the time. I still remember how badly you had Brady going with that story about the Hell's Angels smuggling crank in a moose carcass--"

"True."

Worth could hear the shush of Todd's jacket against the concrete wall as he moved forward. She could let it go... No, she couldn't. "You're shitting me."

"Every word of it. Journalistic fact."

"No wa--" She sat back on her heels and whacked her head on a floor joist. "Ow!"

"Careful, there," Todd said. The beam of his flashlight bounced at random around the walls of the passage as he hitched himself forward. "Hey, the floor's dug deeper here. And the inside wall's further away. Not quite a room, but I'd call it at least a burrow."

Worth scrambled to catch up and found the lip of dirt under her hands where the floor dropped a foot. Her flashlight and his showed a carved-out low-ceilinged square with the poured concrete of the foundation for walls on two sides, and concrete block separating the burrow from the rest of the house's crawlspace. The workmanship was as precise as the well-kept rack of tools in the studio.

Precise enough to shelter a methodical craftsman's masterpieces. His *trophies*. What they were looking for had to be here.

"Buried in the floor?" Worth offered.

"No. He'd want to be able to lay hands on them quickly."

"I'll take the right-hand wall," Worth said, and they began to pass their flashlight beams over the burrow, corner to corner.

"Well, hey, there," Todd said. His light hovered on one of the concrete blocks at the top of the wall. A dark thread of space showed between it and the mortar to each side.

Worth held her flashlight on it while Todd pried at the corners with his car key. The block grated out and proved to be a partial one, with a dark space behind it. Todd hunched forward and got both his forearm and his flashlight in the opening.

"All right," said Worth, holding her light steady. "How about the one about the pot-smoking dalmatian?"

"What? Oh, that I made up. I'd never let a dog get into drugs. Hey, bring your light over here. I think I got something."

And that was that, because nobody ever got the same answer out of Solomon Todd twice. "What is it?"

Something scraped in the hole. "...handle of a little red toolbox. Daph, I got a bad feeling about this."

shadow unit

1.06 "Endgames" - by Emma Bull

Even a man who is pure in heart and says his prayers by night
May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms
And the autumn moon is bright.

---*Curt Siodmak,* The Wolf Man *(1941)*

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., October, 2007

As he walked the hall between Shadow Unit and the more public spaces of the BAU, Stephen Reyes pinched the bridge of his nose and slid his fingers hard down the ridge of each eyebrow, trying to push away his headache. He'd use both hands, but he had the case jacket in his right. The cause of the headache, those documents.

Bureaucracies would kill and eat you like any other monster. Just not quite so literally.

Supervisory Special Agent Pete Pauley met him at the door of the BAU briefing room. Pauley was built like major-league pitchers used to be, before steroids and weight training: long-limbed, big chest, skinny hips. His brown brush cut was always so fresh Reyes wondered if he buzzed it himself. "Sir," Pauley said, for the benefit of the rank and file in earshot.

Reyes smiled, nodded. "Agent Pauley." Because the rank and file didn't need to know when all was not sweetness and light between Down the Hall and the WTF. He walked in, and Pauley shut the door.

Down the Hall, the briefing room had windows. Reyes looked out one at the relentless gray of an October misting rain. "Nice view," he said, because poetic justice was the best kind. He boxed the headache into a corner of his mind. *Later,* he promised it.

"Coffee?" Pauley said. He had the pot in hand.

"No, thank you."

"I've never seen you guys turn down coffee." Pauley poured a cup for himself. "This must be serious."

It was. So he wasn't here to chat, and certainly not about drinking tea.

Reyes pulled out one of the padded chairs and sat down. Get comfortable, as if you owned the place. Pauley had the height advantage standing, anyway. And lately Reyes's right knee hurt if he stood for too long, and the metatarsals and heels of both feet. *You're old, Stephen.* It said so on his driver's license, so it shouldn't be a surprise.

He laid the case jacket on the briefing room table and flipped it open to the first scene photo. "This is *our* case."

Pauley's shoulders rose and fell--a sigh. "You want to tell me why?"

"Because Special Agent Gates says it is."

Pauley set his cup down hard enough to rock coffee over the lip. He swore (at the coffee, or Reyes, or both), snatched a paper napkin from beside the coffee maker, and blotted up the spill. Then he dropped into a chair. "You know how that's gonna fly over here."

"I know that when Hafidha tells me she sees anomalous influence in case documents on screen, I follow up on it."

"With nothing to back her up?"

"Should I not trust my people?"

"That's between you and them. 'Don't worry, it's magic' won't play at this end of the hall."

"How do you know?" Reyes put on his most disarming smile, held both hands palms-up in a half-shrug, half nothing-up-my-sleeve. "I've never tried it before."

Pauley's eyes cut toward the closed door, as if he could see through walls to where Hafidha conversed with information as if it were a living thing, as if her monitors were bound demons that fetched knowledge when she pointed a finger. "My boss thinks your SA at the computer is a way to scam a sympathy pay grade bump for a technical analyst."

"Then your boss is an idiot." Especially given that Hafidha could outscore his boss on the firing range.

"Sometimes. But he doesn't like to get too far Down the Hall. So he doesn't know you the way I do."

"And to know us is to love us." Reyes leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table. Confiding, inviting confidences. You couldn't play a player, which Pauley was. But even players couldn't always control their reflexes. "Why are you so set on hanging onto this one?"

"Besides that it's an easy clearance?"

"Is that what we look for? I missed the memo."

Pauley pushed back in his chair, laced his hands behind his head, and frowned. "Look. It's a plain-vanilla serial arsonist. We do our job, build a profile, send it to Tucson, and go on with our business. At worst, we decide it's a political-cause bomber and hand it to Domestic Counterterrorism, and we're still home by dinner time." Pauley shifted forward, propped his elbow on the table, fingers to his temple with the palm facing out. Signifying openness and interest. Reyes appreciated a good liar. "If you guys get hold of it, Jesus Christ knows what all will go into it and how long it'll take. And if it turns out to be a goddamn plain-vanilla serial arsonist, the egg will be on more faces than yours."

"It's not ordinary serial arson. What happens when Tucson and Pima County rely on your profile, and everything goes to hell?"

"*When.*"

"Your boss may think Gates is a glorified technical analyst. *You* know better."

Pauley took in air, blew out his cheeks on the exhale. "I don't, actually. But I'm more'n half convinced you do."

Reyes couldn't perceive what Hafidha saw and heard when the anomaly touched events documented on her monitors. She said the text fluttered with waves of color, that images flexed and breathed, that audio files developed a background of groaning, scraping distortion. Neither he nor Hafidha could prove it by any method short of mapping activity in her sensory cortex while she was doing it. Even that might not prove it. And Hafidha was as likely to

agree to testing as a cat would to a bath. He needed *her* more than he needed proof.

"They called us for help, Pete."

"No, they called *us.* They don't know *you* exist."

"And whose fault is that?" But Reyes said it mildly, because it wasn't Pete Pauley's fault, either. Reyes closed the manila jacket and spread his hands flat on it. "What do you want to do about this?"

Pauley looked wary. Smart man. "You outrank me."

"But you have the authority to make this decision. It's why you got that second *S*." Which sounded like *You owe us.* Well, if it did, it did. "I could go over your head, and your boss's, and talk to the Assistant Director. The AD hates that, your boss hates that, and when your boss complains to you, you hate that. But I get my case."

Pauley wrapped both hands around his coffee cup and stared into it as if it were the underside of a Magic 8-Ball. "Or I could just give it to you." He raised his head and scowled at Reyes. "And cross my fingers that it doesn't come back here with 'Oops! Sorry!' on it in your handwriting, and I get to explain how all that taxpayer money got spent putting it there."

Reyes leaned back and steepled his fingers in front of a smile. "I never apologize."

*

Daniel Brady brought Chaz Villette back from lunch bigger around than when they left.

Brady heard Hafidha's voice as they rounded the corner from the hall. "See, that's the problem. The only boys who interest me for more than a week are *dead*. And in a *case file*."

It came from Hafidha's office. Chaz caught Brady's eye and cocked his head. So Brady ducked in with Chaz right behind. It didn't sound like a conversation either of them could walk innocently past.

Hafidha was running some kind of mapping software on her center monitor. The screensaver was up on the left one. On the right Brady recognized a

police incident report; *icanhascheezburger.com* was barely showing at the bottom edge.

Daphne Worth was hunched over a spread of forensics reports at the back counter. Her tongue stuck out the corner of her mouth.

"Is it the 'dead' part that works for you, or the 'case file' part?" Brady asked.

"Both," Hafidha said, her eyes on the monitor. "I do not settle." She twitched her left hand sideways--it looked unconscious--and an irregular outline drew over the map on the screen.

Worth raised her head and wiped her bangs out of her eyes. "Poor, poor boys. Destined to be dumped like a flat Coke, unless they can get mysteriously murdered."

Chaz sidled in to peer at Hafidha's map. Worth looked Chaz over and smiled at Brady. *You're welcome*, Brady thought.

"I'd say I don't know where he puts it, but the evidence is right there." Brady jerked his thumb at Chaz's waist, which now almost filled out his tweed jacket.

"Hey!" Chaz glared. It was a good-natured one. When Chaz was pissed off he tended toward no expression at all.

"You can't move fast enough to do anything to me."

"Snake-like torpor?" Worth asked brightly.

"*Hey!*"

"Honey, he's not at all like a python." Hafidha put her left index finger on the tip of her nose and wiggled it side to side. Screensavers popped up on the other monitors. "If he were, you'd be able to see the outline of--" She spun her chair and raised her eyebrows at Brady. "What am I looking for?"

"Two half-pound bacon cheeseburgers, onion rings, and a chocolate shake. And don't let those Carl's Jr. idiots tell you theirs are just as good." Brady pried his raincoat buttons out of their buttonholes.

"Seriously." Chaz beamed. "Always send the Texan to scout for burgers."

Worth squinted at Chaz's middle. "Wait, I think I see an onion ring--"

Chaz pointed at Worth's reports. "D'you want me to use my mighty powers on those, or not?"

"Yes! Yes!" Worth pressed her palms together and looked beseeching. "I'll be nice, I promise. I won't even mention your brave little kidneys--"

Brady jerked his shoulders out of his coat. "Don't start with the kidneys. We got past that bit already. No spinach salad is big enough to be called 'lunch.'" He ducked into the hall for a coat hanger.

Chaz rarely mentioned that the way he had to eat could kill him someday, and when he did, he seemed unalarmed. Brady had to admit the list of things Chaz could not face head-on could be calligraphed on a thumbnail. So maybe dying untimely didn't make that list.

Still. *Intelligent design, my ass. You don't make somebody like that and build in planned obsolescence*. Yes, it was built into everyone else, too. But not like that. It was enough to make Brady feel guilty about being so damned healthy.

Worth stepped out of Hafidha's cave, documents clutched against her chest. She spotted Brady and scurried to join him. "Thanks," she murmured.

"Why can't he just *eat*?" That sounded irritable. And open to interpretation. Well, he *was* irritated--just not at Chaz. Or not at any part of Chaz that Chaz could fix.

Worth looked down at her shoes, and Brady gave himself a swift inward kick. *Keep it for someone who needs scaring*. But Daphne Worth was careful, not timid. He kept forgetting that. When she raised her head he could see she was busy with the question. "I think it's because he loves food. And he resents having to treat it like medication. You know, take X amount six times daily."

Could that take the thrill out a steak and a baked potato? Yeah, it probably could. "Meal in a pill. I thought sci-fi geeks liked that."

Worth glared at him from under her bangs. "Says the only person I know who owns *Pitch Black* on DVD."

"Different kind of geek," he said blandly, to watch her blush.

She tossed the hair off her face and looked back at the door to Hafidha's office. "I nag him. Which is stupid, because it just makes him feel like a project. But he can go out for burgers with you, and it's..." She raised her shoulders and squinched her mouth. "It's just going out for burgers. That's a good thing."

"In spite of the poor little kidneys?"

She snorted and looked down at the jumble of paper in her arms. "I've got to make sense of these before five. Veterans' stats. Falkner intimidated three neurosurgeons at Walter Reed to get them."

"Hate to waste that kind of mojo," Brady said gravely, nodding.

He got a good big grin for it. Worth wasn't as easy with him as she was with Hafidha and Chaz. He hadn't earned it. Now she shook her head over her files and said, "Someone should warn them not to mess with the Jewish Mom from Hell."

"Jews don't believe in hell," Reyes said, blowing in from the hall. He had a manila folder in one hand. "Everybody, briefing room, five minutes." He sailed through the bullpen and into his office.

Hafidha stuck her head around the edge of her door. "Hah! He rescued my case, I bet you money."

"Arizona?" Chaz asked, oozing past her out of the room.

"Seventy-eight degrees. Sunny. And best of all, nobody's dead."

"Count me in," said Brady.

*

On reflection, Reyes preferred the WTF's briefing room to the larger one Down the Hall. More congenial company, for a start, even accounting for the Loneliness of Command factor.

He wished Falkner were back from Quantico, though. The team trusted her. They were more comfortable with Reyes, with each other, with whatever threat they were assessing, when she was there.

Brady had propped himself against the wall by the door, having lost the race for a chair, and was eyeing the images of blackened ruins on the monitor. "So why is this one of ours, again?"

Reyes considered the things he wanted to say, including, *Oh, not you, too*.

Before he could settle on one, Hafidha gave a little twist of her shoulders. "Because I said so."

Worth's head swivelled at the note in Hafidha's voice. Pack dynamics; Worth was most sensitive to them. Chaz stopped his coffee cup halfway to his mouth, frowning through the steam.

Eight people were bound to break out into subgroups. Any dinner party conversation demonstrated that. This team split along varying boundaries, depending on the circumstances: age, military background, gender, sense of humor, a few dozen others. Reyes had thought Hafidha's and Chaz's club was private, no alphas allowed. But the door seemed to have opened for Worth.

Well, if people were easy to figure out, every agent in the BAU would be looking for work.

Sol Todd's attention was fixed on the sparrow-track shorthand in his notebook. Nikki Lau pretended to read the file in front of her, but under lowered lids, she eyed Hafidha.

Brady made the half-turn that was all he had room for between Todd's chair and the wall, so he could face Hafidha without cricking his neck. "I'm not saying it's not ours. I'm asking why, is all."

Chaz ducked his head to his coffee cup and swallowed hastily. "Conventional triggering devices, explosive, and extent of damage. No anomalous mechanism or distribution."

Brady nodded. "What Chaz said. Where's the boogey in our boogeyman?"

Hafidha wrinkled her nose. "Oh, *that* why. Sorry."

Lau sent a sympathetic grimace across the table. "We don't doubt your uncanny gifts." Filling in any social gaps Brady might have left.

Another unexpected alliance--Brady and Lau--and one of equals. There'd never been a sense, even when Lau first came into the unit, of Brady taking her under his wing. Reyes wished he'd been privy to the mechanism of that acquaintance. He suspected it would tell him a lot about Brady and Lau both.

"So," Lau continued, "it's possible there's evidence that hasn't been collected yet."

"Or the Mulder Factor isn't in the explosions themselves." Todd leaned his chin on the heel of his right hand and contemplated the ceiling over Lau's head.

"Or both." Reyes studied the faces around the table. "We need to work this as if we were profiling a normal arson case. We'll get to a host eventually." Six heads nodded. "That leaves us with four explosions and fires in the past month that destroyed structures in housing developments under construction on the outskirts of Tucson."

"In Edward Abbey country," Todd added.

Lau raised her eyebrows. "*Not* the playwright. No, that's Albee."

"Abbey. Writer and environmentalist. And fellow crazy old fart." Todd sounded grave, but Lau snickered. "He's credited with creating--well, popularizing, at least--the concept of monkeywrenching."

"Eco-terrorism," Brady said. He looked around the room. Reyes knew he was registering various forms of frowning. He stretched his long body like a cat and twitched up his lips at one corner. "According to Bureau reporting policy."

Hafidha rolled her eyes. "Because the line between civil disobedience and terrorism is still not blurry enough."

"And still not ours to draw. Focus, people." Reyes watched them do it. "Let's start with Todd's hypothetical monkeywrencher. What do we have for environmental triggers?"

"Tons," Chaz said. "Arizona just passed Nevada as the fastest growing state, and the whole Southwest is running out of water. The Colorado River system's been coming up short by almost a million acre-feet a year. Every new housing start is a potential new water demand: eighty to a hundred gallons per day per resident in the house."

No one commented anymore when Chaz produced facts like that, and Chaz no longer flinched after he did it.

"Plus habitat destruction, air pollution from construction equipment and wind erosion, introduction of non-native plants," Lau chipped in. "These aren't single housing starts. The developers usually scrape the whole planned area flat first thing, hundreds of acres at a time."

Chaz shot her an admiring look.

Brady crossed his arms over his chest and nodded; Reyes hadn't expected that. "Emergency responders have a beef with this stuff, too. County planning and zoning commission doesn't do its job, you end up with a dense population and not enough fire, police, and ambulance service. Or even road access, sometimes."

"How many developers are we talking about?" Todd asked.

Hafidha flipped her laptop open and raised her eyebrows at it. *It's all right*, Reyes told himself again. *She's the good guys*. "One. Gilden Properties."

"Iiiinteresting." Lau tilted forward and propped her chin on one hand, tapped her lips with the end of her pen. Reyes watched Chaz stare at the pen, catch himself, and duck his head.

Hafidha's mouth twisted sourly. "Yeah, except Arthur Gilden is the biggest real estate development mogul in southern Arizona by a factor of, oh, ten."

"So statistically, four explosions in Gilden Properties developments isn't too significant." Chaz sighed.

"But we'll follow up," Reyes said. "Any individuals or groups publicly opposing Gilden?"

Hafidha looked at him over the laptop screen. "Oh, Boss-man. *Seriously*."

Yes, stupid question. "All right. Table the environmental angle for now. Other motives?"

"Personal." Worth bit her lip. "Someone lost a job with the developer, or a contractor or subcontractor. Or lost property or investment money, or was injured on a building site."

"Injury's a common way in for the anomaly," Todd observed.

"Good. What else?"

"Industrial sabotage," said Brady. "If there's a building boom on, it means big money for somebody. Maybe big enough to commit arson over."

"Insurance claims," Lau offered. "This will be costing the insurer a bomb." She flushed. "So to speak."

Brady frowned. "But more than Gilden would make selling the properties?"

"Sure-thing lump-sum payment," Lau replied with a shrug. "If Gilden is strapped for cash-- Hafs, how about financial reports on Gilden Properties?"

Hafidha shook her head."Guys, we are so missing something." She pointed, palm-up, at her screen, then at the monitor at the end of the room. "No bodies. No physical injuries. Just property damage."

Reyes watched them, saw the fact sink in that had driven him down the hall to lean on Pauley.

"No *hurt*," Worth said. "The Thing wants pain."

One way or another, it wanted pain. A gamma sought other people's pain. A beta-- It was only a hypothesis, that a beta used its own exposure to suffering to control the anomaly.

But suffering could also weaken the organism's defenses. Pain was a crack the anomaly could use.

"If he wants pain, he'll escalate. Soon." Reyes let that take root before he added, "I'll head the away team; Brady, Lau, Chaz, you're with me."

The team gathered their notes. Chaz looked sidelong at Reyes before he stuffed his in his backpack and threw it over his right shoulder. Reyes stared back. But if Chaz had considered saying something, he'd changed his mind. He joined the others filing out the door, quieter than they'd come in and more purposeful. Reyes followed them.

He met--nearly ran into--Esther Falkner outside the door. "We've got it?" she said.

Reyes nodded. "And the team's briefed."

She fell into step beside him as he headed for his office. He was hurrying, but Falkner was long-legged and long-striding. It made him feel as if he wasn't moving fast enough. "Who's going?"

"Brady, Lau, and Chaz."

He watched her attention sweep over Todd's desk, as if by accident. "Good. Hafidha, Todd, and Worth are a match for anything that'll come up here."

Reyes stopped at his office door. "Where will you be?"

"Tucson."

There was no challenge in her face or voice, no suggestion that she was prepared to argue. She never argued with him in front of the team. Reyes opened his office door and nodded her inside.

"All right. Why?" Reyes sat on the front edge of his desk, leaving the visitor's chair for Falkner. But she shrugged at it.

"More back trouble?" Reyes asked.

She winced and stretched. "My next car will have lumbar supports. Adjustable. Until then, I'm just waiting for the naproxen to kick in."

"You could get a scrip, you know."

She smiled, crooked and self-aware. "Then when would I operate all that heavy machinery?"

"There is that."

"You think this could be a beta." She sprang it without warning, without so much as a shift in her weight.

"I have no reason to think anything at all, except that this is serial arson, and that an anomalous influence is involved."

"Did you tell them?"

"I don't have anything to tell." Falkner managed to look skeptical without changing expression. Reyes relented. "They're halfway to it by themselves."

"You taught them what to look for."

He'd taught them what he knew, and what he thought he knew. Hafidha had already forced him to modify the definition of a beta. He might be just as wrong about the rest of it. There might be a state between beta and gamma. There might be an evolutionary process. Hafidha might be going through it. Chaz--

Chaz, by his own account, might have converted before he could walk. A newborn beta would fail to thrive, but a nine-month-old could consume enough calories to support growth and anomalous brain function. If there was an evolution, shouldn't it have happened to him?

But that was why he kept Chaz in sight, wasn't it? And why he made sure someone had an eye on Hafidha.

Reyes sighed. "Esther, don't take this personally, but I don't need you in Tucson."

"No, you probably don't. Do you think Lau and Brady do?"

It stopped him so hard he was angry, because having it pointed out that he'd been thick-headed and insensitive did that. But only for an instant. "The Melinda Grossman case was over a month ago." He felt entitled to offer an excuse, at least.

"You know what it's like when there are kids involved. And that was a worst-case scenario."

Reyes wanted to say, *You're a parent. It's different for you.* But it was worse when it was a kid. Or someone close to you. Or yourself, seen through clouded, fly-specked glass. And he should have remembered that.

"We should have got Grossman alive." His voice came harsh out of his throat. Melinda Grossman's mythology had required a gun. Keep them away, and she might have been safe.

Imprisoned for life, unless someone found a cure for a malady that didn't officially exist.

Falkner leaned forward to give him the hard wide-eyed stare. "And Brady and Lau shouldn't have split up, and Lau shouldn't have approached Melinda solo. Everyone understands that. Brady and Lau most of all."

In a dangerous job, comparatively little things could blow one's concentration or undermine one's confidence. Melinda Grossman was not a little thing.

He laced his fingers and stared at them. "Sometimes I zip right past the obvious, don't I?"

"One of the perils of being so damned fast."

It was good of Falkner to not say aloud what she was thinking: *They will run until they drop in their tracks to prove themselves. And you will let them do it, because in the heat of the chase you forget they're human. You forget to* be *human.*

He forced his hands through his hair, across his scalp. Just for the sensation; his hair was too short and dense for his fingers to affect how it lay. His forehead went on for longer than it used to. "It feels as if we're almost out of time. It always does, lately."

Falkner studied his face. *Reading the instrument panel,* he thought with a surge of irritation. He pushed away from the desk and moved to look out the window. The weather there was the same as Down the Hall's.

"Any idea where you're getting that feeling?" At least she didn't sound like a therapist with a delusional patient.

He shook his head. "It's not as if the anomaly has the equivalent of the nuclear clock ticking away."

"Not as far as we know."

That made him turn. Falkner's arms were crossed, her hands cupping her elbows. Protective gesture, at odds with her ironic smile.

He smiled back. "Thank you for that reassuring analysis. Hell, maybe it's just age."

"Todd's older than you."

"Todd's still thirty-five in the privacy of his own brain. But some days I feel the fullness of my years a little more than I like." The headache was coming back. He rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. "When mandatory retirement comes around, how the hell do I walk away, knowing this is still out there?"

Her gaze fell away, sideways and down, as if a landscape had opened at her feet. Falkner's emotions crossed her face in millimeters and microseconds as a rule, and they rarely included sadness. But Reyes could swear he saw it now. *The loneliness of command.* Even in a shared command, one was alone.

But when she looked up she wore the ironic smile again. "I wondered, after I read the story of Jacob wrestling the messenger. That must have

overshadowed every other conflict in his life. Do you think any fight satisfied him after that? Even when he won?"

The Pentateuch and the Christian Bible. The holy metaphors, easier to look into than mirrors. Reyes drew a long breath and raised his eyebrows. "Don't we call them 'angels'?"

"Not where I come from."

Reyes had to admit, he was glad she'd be with them.

*

Brady claimed the couch in the cabin of the Gulfstream. Even in a luxury business jet, there wasn't quite enough legroom for him to get comfortable in most of the seats on the plane. On the couch he could stick his legs into the aisle. Pulling his feet out of the way when someone headed for the galley or the john was a small price to pay.

Didn't Chaz mind accordion-folding into one of the rows? He was taller than Brady, for godsake. Well, he got a place to set his laptop. And the pleasure of sitting opposite Lau. It was fun to watch him sneak appreciative looks across the fold-out table when he thought Lau wouldn't notice.

The overhead task lights pooled on the two of them, made patent leather of Lau's hair, highlighted the aura of fine, stubborn frizz around Chaz's. Nice effects, but if Brady were doing the lighting, he'd want more fill to counter the highlights off the tip of Lau's nose and the entire length of Chaz's. What fill there was came from Chaz's laptop screen, and that needed a gel; the blue glow tinted his face greenish-gray.

As if she could hear him thinking, Lau sent a little sideways look and grin over to Brady. He smiled back, closed-mouthed. Like an old married couple, except for the parts that weren't. An old married couple who *liked* each other.

With his fidgety mannerisms and too-long curling hair and flaky sense of style, Chaz would set off a lot of people's fag-o-meter. A lot of people were pretty damned stupid, when it came down to it. Chaz was so relentlessly heterosexual that Brady sometimes wondered if it were part of the beta wiring: the anomaly pressuring the organism to pass its traits on.

Chaz seemed to have been responsible so far about unintentional spawning. Well, if eventually there were more of Chaz's genes in the pool, Brady could

live with that.

The same people who'd tag Chaz as queer would see Brady, in his business suit and business haircut, with his linebacker shoulders and Mount Rushmore emotions, as a man's man.

It gave him a lot of unworthy satisfaction to think how right they were.

"It's the favorite sport of Arizona's environmental radical fringe," Brady said across the aisle to Chaz and Lau. "Other places, they spike trees and let farm animals loose. Here it's burning down new construction." He tapped the top sheet in the folder on his lap. "Mark Warren Sands in Phoenix, spring 2000 to January 2001, multiple fires under the identity of Coalition to Save the Preserves."

"Which didn't really exist." Chaz rummaged in his backpack, came up with a two-pack of granola bars. "Sands was an excitement-motivated arsonist who invented a bogus group to generate media coverage. That was what he was getting off on." He tore the wrapper along the seam with the quick efficiency of a mountain man skinning a deer.

Lau looked over Chaz's head into some non-existent vista. "I remember him. Former public relations guy. He said he did it to prove he could still run a campaign."

Falkner slid out of her seat further up the cabin, rubbed the inside corners of her eyes with her middle fingers, and started down the aisle toward them. Brady tucked his feet against the couch as she passed and she gave him a bent-cornered smile in acknowledgment.

Brady flipped a page. "Then June 2001. Four high-dollar homes under construction torched in exclusive real estate on the north side of Tucson. No suspects, never solved."

Chaz swallowed a mouthful of Chaz-biscuit. "Those were six years ago, custom homes in exclusive areas. Class and privilege issues as much as local ecology. But this guy is targeting high-density development, middle-class sprawl." He bit the second granola bar in half as if for emphasis.

"In this economy, being able to buy at all can seem like wealth and privilege," Brady countered.

Reyes twisted around in his seat, elbow on the arm rest. "We're not looking at an activist group."

"Political arsonists sign their work." Falkner leaned in the galley passthrough, cooling her coffee with her breath. "That's the point: unless they claim credit, it's perceived as just a fire, not a political statement."

"None of our sites were signed," Reyes finished. "And no contact with the media to claim credit."

Lau tapped her file with the end of her pen. "Which doesn't rule out the possibility that our guy started as a monkeywrencher. Fanaticism's another crack for the anomaly."

"What about the physical evidence? Any similarities between these bombings and the earlier construction fires?" Brady asked. If the gamma had gone to fire-setting school with an existing radical group, the hardware might be consistent.

Chaz gave a dissatisfied flat-lipped grimace. "Radio-controlled remote triggering, but that's so common with cases like this it hardly proves anything, except that the UNSUB can use a soldering iron. But the 2001 fires were set with incendiaries brought from off-site. Our guy is using the gas lines of the houses themselves for explosive material."

"When does the gas get turned on in a new development?" Falkner asked.

"He'd have to know, wouldn't he?" Lau thumbed a note on her BlackBerry.

Reyes frowned, the one that meant "good job." "Arson investigator's meeting us at the airport. Tomorrow we'll go over the sites, see how they fit with what we know about serial arsonist profiles. And keep looking for the anomalous element. There's a host in here somewhere. As long as we don't know where, we can't warn local police and fire when not to turn their backs."

Brady looked down at his lap full of paper. "I don't want to jinx us, but this would be easier if we had some victims to do victimology on."

"We do." Falkner sipped coffee and quirked an eyebrow. "Arthur Gilden."

"You're a sad excuse for a capitalist," Reyes told Brady.

Brady snorted.

Act II

The stars had faded out of the sky, but it wasn't bright enough yet to see if the gray overhead was cloud. Work lights glared from stands and truck mounts; in another hour the investigators wouldn't need them.

There was only so much they could do now, anyway. This was a fresh crime scene, and the evidence was still too hot to touch.

Lieutenant Graciela Carraldo stood at Reyes's shoulder, compact, plump, and scowling, hair pulled back from her wide forehead and broad Apache cheekbones, her fire department jacket zipped against the chill. "Looks like our guy wanted you to have a nice new one to play with."

Reyes turned at the note in her voice. "Did he know we were coming?"

Carraldo leaned away a fraction of an inch, straightened her shoulders. "My department knew. Tucson PD. Local news is covering this as ongoing, but nobody leaked an FBI story to 'em."

"Good. He's getting enough attention." Outside the police vehicle cordon, TV remote van transmitters rose like the necks of high-tech giraffes.

Beyond the cordon, hundreds of acres of desert lay scraped and featureless, except for flagged stakes marking imaginary streets, hypothetical lot boundaries, paths for utilities that, like Schroedinger's Cat, might or might not be there when you dug down to them. The earth-movers had stripped away the desert's reality and left nothing but markers for a dream.

Inside the cordon firefighters prowled with their equipment, as if looking for a lick of flame they might have missed. Carraldo's investigators huddled at the back doors of their van, drinking coffee while Chaz asked them questions. At the center of it all lay this row of blackened rectilinear skeletons, a short block of the dream laid waste.

"The security guard was on site?" Reyes asked.

Carraldo nodded. "There's not a builder or developer in town hasn't put extra security on their sites. But look at this." She swept an arm, encompassing the burned block, the houses around it, some of which were still only foundations and frames, the concrete pads waiting to be built on, the flatbed trailers stacked with lumber and pipe. "How many security guards d'you

think you'd need to spot this guy, in this mess, in the dark? Especially if the first tip you have that he's here is shit blowing up?" She shook her head. "And your average security guard? Better than nothing. But I'd rather have a couple of junkyard dogs."

Reyes puffed air out his nose. Police academy washouts, kids working their way through college, and a few good career rent-a-cops. "The guard called it in?"

"Three-oh-nine a.m."

Chaz jogged up with a cup of the arson team's coffee just as she said it. The collar of his wool jacket was turned up, and he clutched the styrofoam in both hands as if he longed for mittens. "No pattern in the times or dates of the fires. I checked them against moon phases and rising and setting times. So far it's random."

"What, do you think he's a werewolf?" Carraldo asked, glaring.

Chaz looked at her sideways under half-lowered lids. "He might have avoided full moons because he'd be easier to spot." He enunciated carefully. Carraldo didn't seem to notice the insult.

"So his timetable may be internal," Reyes said. "The pressure builds up. When it becomes overwhelming..."

"Boom." Chaz made his unhappy long-mouthed grimace.

Carraldo shrugged. "No way to predict the next time or place?"

"Not yet."

Reyes lifted his chin at the crime scene. "The intervals between fires will get shorter. That, we're sure of."

Brady strode down the chewed, muddy track that would someday be a street and stopped beside Carraldo. "Tucson PD is combing for shoe prints and tire marks. Of which there are plenty. Mostly from several dozen work boots and double-axle trucks."

"Can't rule those out. We're looking for someone who knows the gas hookups. It might be someone in the building trades."

The sky was white-tinged-with-gold over the mountains to the east. Reyes pressed his coat against his body with his elbows to hold the heat close. He was going to run up against the wall of lack of sleep any minute; feeling the chill was a warning. Ten years ago he could operate on adrenaline and curiosity for forty-eight hours at a time.

Chaz frowned down at his coffee. "I put a lot of sugar in this, but I should still get breakfast pretty quick."

"Thank god." Brady took a step toward where they'd parked the cars, and shrugged Chaz on to join him. "My stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

"You realize that one's older than both of us combined," Chaz said, tolerantly amused.

"Got better?"

"Nope." Chaz hunched his backpack higher on his right shoulder. "The classics are classic for a reason."

"Call when you're done," Reyes told them. "I'll have work for you."

He watched them stride off among the fire trucks. There'd been some unspoken agreement that had followed the mention of breakfast. Brady might be hungry, but it wasn't about Brady, however much he'd made it look that way. Chaz could be prickly about being taken care of. He didn't seem to mind this, though.

As long as they got the work done, Reyes didn't need to know the negotiations behind it. If that changed, he could worry about it then.

Carraldo also watched them go. "The skinny one seems kind of young. I thought maybe he was a tech, but they don't carry, do they?"

Reyes's jaw muscles tensed, and his toes pushed against the insoles of his shoes, as if they could get a better purchase on the dirt. Digging in for a fight. Falkner would probably ignore Carraldo. Only one of the reasons Reyes would predecease Esther Falkner: hypertension.

"The skinny one," he said. "Oh, Special Agent Dr. Villette. He's been with the ACTF for two years now."

He watched her readjust her assumptions, then realize that was why he'd said it, then fight down the urge to come back at him.

"It's all right." Reyes smiled. "You can call me a manipulative son of a bitch. Everyone does."

Carraldo struggled against it, but finally gave a quick, growly laugh. "Not 'til you're out of hearing, I bet." She shook her head. "Well, you know where to find me. If I can grease any wheels, just ask."

"I'll let you know as soon as we have some leads. Thank you, Lieutenant."

Reyes watched her off to the arson van before he turned and headed toward the perimeter. Lau and Falkner would be there. Time to get their initial story straight, and figure out how much good it could do them if released into the wild.

The nice thing about this one, so far, was that there was nothing to cover up.

Lau seemed to be none the worse for lack of sleep. She was a small, straight brush stroke of dark brown suit and copper-colored sweater, already camera-worthy, bright-eyed and intense and saying into her phone, "Then call the press conference for three. That'll nail the early-evening broadcasts, and we can give the *Daily Star*, the *Citizen*, and the *Republic* snacks after that if we've got 'em."

Falkner stood ten feet away, looking out over the news vans and their crews, her hands deep in the pockets of her black overcoat. A raven and--what would that make Lau? Some smaller bird he couldn't recall. People retired to Arizona for the birdwatching. Weren't there birds everywhere? And surely there were better things to do with one's sunset years than search the view with binoculars.

Falkner jerked her head toward Lau. "As you can see, progress is being made."

"Mmm. Will we have something reassuring to say by three?"

"I was thinking, 'Don't worry, the FBI is on the case.'"

Reyes huffed air out his nose. "We get mixed results with that one."

Lau disconnected and came over. "How are we doing?"

"The arson investigators have our shopping list. Which is almost identical to theirs, right now."

Lau grimaced; it looked as if she'd learned it from Chaz, then reduced it to normal human proportions. "Did you see what they named this development?"

He hadn't, actually; he'd noticed steel serif letters on the stuccoed ornamental sweeps to either side of the main drive, but it was dark then, and he was thinking about explosions.

"Vista Cienega."

It surprised a crack of laughter out of him.

Falkner frowned from Lau to Reyes. "What?"

Reyes looked across the brutal flatness to the fringe of gray-green on the horizon that must be desert plants. "'Cienega' means 'swamp.'"

*

Feeding Chaz was like being responsible for keeping the Energizer Bunny topped off.

Brady pulled in at the first promising Mexican cafe they saw ("promising" in this case meaning a place where people came to eat, and assumed the food would be Mexican because that's what food was supposed to be). The parking lot was nearly full, mostly with aging pickup trucks, some with business names on the sides.

The front windows were studded with party-store paper decorations: skeletons, bats, jack-o'lanterns. He'd forgotten about Halloween. Apparently he was getting old and stuffy. Besides, they got Halloween most days at work, minus the candy bars.

Brady pushed chile rellenos, rice, and beans across the formica tabletop until Chaz was unfolded and fully inflated, like a blow-up figure on a car dealer's roof. In a place like this, the clientele envied and admired Chaz's capacity for food. The kid ought to have a Mexican grandmother to feed him and be proud of him.

Chaz wiped salsa from the corner of his mouth with his napkin and sighed. "All birthdays should start like that."

"It's your birthday? You were born on *Halloween*?"

"Statistically speaking, someone has to be."

"Yeah. But it was *you*. Suddenly the universe doesn't look so random."

"About the funny. Don't quit your day job." Chaz tugged his laptop out of the abyss of his black leather backpack (which was full of information and food, based on past evidence). He popped the lid open. "Gah. No signal."

"*Taquerias* with free wi-fi are few and far between."

"Tucson has municipal service."

"Downtown, maybe. What you after?"

Chaz shrugged and tucked the laptop away. "New homes as a proportion of real estate sales. I remembered what you said about industrial sabotage, and I wondered how much money we're looking at. And Hafs is sending financial records and lists of activist groups. I could snag 'em with the phone, but it'd be harder to work with them."

"We'll find a coffee place." Brady stretched and felt a pop between his shoulder blades as the tension let go. "Any speculations on why our gamma isn't doing magic tricks?"

"Just because the detonations aren't anomalous--"

"I know. He might be hoodooing something else. But it was the arson reports that Hafidha spotted, so I'm thinking not."

Chaz frowned. "If you've got it, you use it. Pretty much what humans do, whether it's good for us or not." He flourished a hand at the window, the street, the businesses and traffic along it. "Maybe the explosions are secondary, to destroy the evidence of what he's doing?"

"If so, it works. We got nothin'."

Chaz's mouth twisted as if he were chewing the inside of his lip. "What if...what if he's not a gamma?"

"He blows stuff up, Chaz. Unless-- You think Hafidha fucked up?"

"Not even slightly." He hunched one shoulder, looked down at his empty plate. "*I* have been known to blow stuff up. A little. Sort of."

Oh, really, now? Brady thought. Chaz's face didn't tell him anything. "Not like this, man."

"No, not like this." Chaz cleared his throat. "Well, even I can't eat any more. Break time's over; back on our heads. I'll call in." He slid out of the booth, dragging his backpack behind him, and ambled toward the door to the parking lot.

When Chaz had more to say, Brady figured he'd hear it.

Mexican for breakfast made Brady nostalgic. In Dallas, when he caught third shift, it would be his dinner and Andre's breakfast, and Andre would order *migas* or *machaca con huevos*, because he said if it didn't have eggs, it didn't count.

And arteriosclerosis turned out not to be an issue.

Maybe "nostalgic" wasn't exactly the right word.

Brady paid the bill at the register. The woman who took his card was about sternum-high on him, with a straight black ponytail to her waist and a wide mouth. "You guys get enough to eat?" she asked, with a grin and a pointed look at the table strewn with scraped plates.

I should have let Chaz get the bill. Flirting was free, but Chaz would have appreciated it more. "Yep. Just like Mom used to make."

She looked him up and down and shook her head sadly. "You should be so lucky."

He let a little Dallas into his words. "Texas moms make damned fine *frijoles refritos*."

"Oh, *Tex-Mex*. It's pretty good, if you can't get to Sonora." She gave him a wink and four peppermints with the receipt.

Brady stepped out into the morning sunshine. The sky was turning the deep turquoise skies never seemed to manage east of the left half of Texas. It was probably still raining in D. C.

Chaz stood hip-shot against the rented SUV, his attention on the thin rectangle of polished metal and black glass in his hand.

Brady squinted at it through reflected sun. "Is that--"

"--an Adorable Overhyped Phone? Yes."

He looked without looking at Chaz's shabby jacket, frayed collar points, and scarred oxfords. "You spend your entire salary on kitchen knives, phones, and wristwatches?"

"It's just *one* phone. And the watch is Chinese." Chaz stuck out his left arm to admire the domed crystal. "Swiss engineers, though." He sounded smug.

Not unlike the way Brady talked about the V-8 in his truck. "So what's Dad got for us?"

"Arthur Gilden, of Gilden Properties."

"Victimology. He looked at the weather and decided he ought to profile the scenes himself?"

Chaz held out the phone. "You could call him and ask."

"Aww. You're trying to be funny."

"I'm succeeding, too." Chaz bounced once, a little springy motion on his toes.

Brady tossed him two of the peppermints. "Let's go talk to a rich guy."

"I'll drive."

"No."

Gilden Properties occupied the third floor of a bronze-glass office building on Broadway, between a row of high-end boutiques and a chain hotel. "Occupied" to distinguish from "owned," which was Gilden Properties' relationship to the rest of the building. All the metal in the lobby and the elevators was brushed brass, and the gloss on the black marble floors was downright oppressive.

Brady showed his I.D. to the receptionist, a slender red-haired woman in a black suit and too much mascara. Chaz was right behind him with his. "Special Agents Brady and Villette to see Mr. Gilden."

The wall behind the reception desk looked like waxed oak, low-gloss, fine-grained, and featureless except for a shallow niche cut into it about a third of the way along the right side. A figurine filled it. The carving was rougher than anything Brady had seen since they pulled into the parking lot, but it was unmistakeable: a man in a long robe, bearded, curly-haired, a lily in one

hand and an absurdly modern handsaw in the other. St. Joseph the carpenter, who helped sell houses.

"Mr. Gilden is expecting you." The receptionist sounded breathless.

"I'll take 'em," said a resonant male voice on Brady's right. He turned to see a thickset square-faced man with graying brown hair and an easy, confiding smile. "Dave Schumacher. VP of Acquisitions." He thrust his right hand out to Brady. "Gil's expecting you."

Classic "you can trust me" handshake. *Sure, you can*, Brady thought. But damn, he felt as if he ought to. *The guy could probably sell you your own teeth*. "Special Agent Daniel Brady. This is Special Agent Charles Villette." Brady turned to Chaz.

Chaz leaned over a scale model across from the reception desk: a miniature community on a tabletop held up by a black marble pedestal. He raised his head. "This isn't anything like where last night's explosion happened."

It wasn't. The tiny model buildings seemed to be sculpted rather than built from heavy card like most architect's mockups; their right angles were softened like old adobe. Mirror floor plans and varied lot angles made each house seem unique, though Brady suspected there were only maybe eight or ten basic designs. Chaz would know for sure. The development was laid out in a series of concentric circles, with car traffic routed around the backs of the houses and walking paths along the fronts. The whole thing centered on a little park and a round community building, with what looked like retail property on the outside and an event space in the middle.

Schumacher's smile stretched. "La Corona. Pretty, isn't it? That's our dream project. Green materials, low water demand, mixed use, a real village feel. We've got a team working on how to make it profitable."

Chaz did the chin-tuck he usually applied to Sol Todd's least-believable stories. "I'd think these would be bought up pretty fast."

"Too expensive per unit. As much as we'd have to sell one of those houses for, you could build yourself a custom on a few acres in the foothills." Schumacher shook his head. "People want to buy a lifestyle. But they want it for the price of a house." It had the sound of a pat phrase. He frowned down at the model as if it were responsible for the failure of several dozen visions.

Chaz twitched his eyebrows at Brady. Brady resolved to ask him later what the hell he meant.

Schumacher shrugged and got his smile back. "Come on, I'll take you to Gil's office."

Arthur Gilden's office was bigger than a few of Brady's past apartments. Gilden's wide rosewood desk cut at a diagonal across one corner, facing an enormous spread of floor-to-ceiling window that formed most of the opposite two walls. It overlooked a green fuzz of palo verde trees and the long stripe of Broadway Boulevard, alive with traffic.

Anyone who came to talk to Gilden sat with his back to the view. It made Brady twitchy. So he resolved not to twitch.

Gilden stood up and came around the desk to greet them. He was big, close to Brady's height, and heavy. Judging from the fit of his suit, he'd been heavier. Brady knew Chaz would notice, too. His hair was still dark, but it had given up fighting for the top of his head, and left suntan and freckles in undisputed possession.

Brady had expected another salesman greeting, but Gilden nodded with consulting-physician gravity and kept his right hand in his trouser pocket.

"Welcome, gentlemen. Please, sit." Gilden's voice was louder than the room called for. "Can I offer you water? Coffee? Soda? Only diet, I'm afraid." He waved them to the pair of leather armchairs ranged before the desk.

Brady sank into one and nearly laughed. Designed to make the visitor look up at Gilden. "No, thank you," Brady said, and Chaz, perched on the front of the other chair, shook his head.

Schumacher lingered at the office door. "Gil, if you don't need me here, I'll get back to the South Tucson project."

"I've got this. Thanks, Dave."

Schumacher's smile looked a little forced. But he shot a last look at Gilden, Brady, and Chaz, and left.

"I'm grateful to you for coming out to help with this." Gilden made it sound as if he'd hired them.

So Brady went for coolly professional. "It's important to stop someone like this before he escalates."

"Escalates?" Gilden looked blank. "To what?"

"That depends on why he's doing it," said Chaz. Based on Gilden's face, that didn't help him much.

Brady pushed his shoulders against the chair back and stuck his elbows out over the arms, occupying as much space as possible. "Mr. Gilden, it may be coincidence that only your properties have been hit by the arsonist. But in case it's not, we need to know why you or your company might have been targeted. Can you tell us a little about your competitors?" It seemed the safest place to start.

Gilden blinked, deliberate and owl-like. Then he spread his hands above his desk, shaping a large space between them. "It's a dog-eat-dog business, Agent. There's outfits who'd bend a few state statutes to grab a job away from us. But none of 'em would commit this kind of crime."

"Would they say the same of you?"

"'Scuse me?" Gilden's eyebrows climbed his forehead.

"That you'd bend state statutes."

"Agent Brady, if we'd done anything actionable, we'd be in court. We've been fined a few times--we've missed filing deadlines, we hired a damned incompetent hydrologist and got slapped with a county notice. That sounds bad, but it's the price of doing business. I'll bet a few corners get cut in your job, too."

Chaz's eyebrows rose. Brady made his voice cold and dry as a martini made with Stoli from the freezer. "We're not noted for it."

Gilden turned alarmingly red. "Sorry. But my point is, this industry has more people looking over its shoulder than nuclear power. If we didn't keep our noses clean, we'd be shut down. We're competitive, but we're not criminals. Whatever the Sierra Club types say when you stick a microphone in front of 'em."

"Have you been targeted by activist groups?" Chaz asked.

Gilden started; he seemed to have forgotten Chaz was there. "There's 'activists' at every county commission meeting. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on studies and tests the county wants. We show up to present them and the room fills up with flannel-shirt self-declared 'experts' trying to shoot holes in every sentence. We come with facts. They come with a load of alarmist bull. These people cost us a fortune."

"What about personal enemies, Mr. Gilden?"

Gilden smiled at Chaz; not the sort of smile that was going to go down well. "Agent, if this was about me, they could find me here or at my home. Besides, I thought teenage vandalism accounted for most crimes like this."

Chaz's face was as immobile as it could get when he replied, "Though these are explosions, we're treating them as arson for the purpose of the investigation; the explosion appears to be just to spread the fire. Vandalism is one motive for arson. There's also thrill-seeking, concealment of evidence, revenge--against a person, an institution, a group or minority, or society in general--and ideological extremism. But the most common one after vandalism is profit."

Brady was almost sorry to give Gilden an excuse to be the first to break eye contact. "The devices used suggest this isn't a high school kid on a spree. Have you had to fire anyone lately? A contractor, an employee? Someone who made a fuss about it, or that you'd expect to make a fuss and didn't?"

"If we screwed a contractor, it'd be all over town in fifteen minutes. We'd have land and nobody to build on it." Gilden glowered like a Victorian politician in a tintype. "And my employees? Agent Brady, this company is my family. I raise hell over safety, health--my people are the best in the business. They could work for anybody. But they choose to stay here."

"Family." Brady decided not to share the stats on family violence.

Gilden raised his chin, relaxed his mouth. This was ground he felt sure of. "Six months ago, Dave--Dave Schumacher, met you out front--had a heart attack. Not a big one, but it was a wake-up call. Dave and I were buying properties to flip twenty years ago. It would have been like losing a brother.

"So I started a company-wide weight-loss incentive." Gilden pushed back from his desk, drew his right fist out of his pants pocket, hooked his thumb

in his belt, and tugged it away from his waist. "And I don't ask my people to do anything I won't do."

If Gilden or one of his employees was the gamma, a company weight-loss program would make finding them harder. "Any new ventures in the last few months? Anything that would step on a new set of toes?"

"The Lago Oro project is seniors' resort living. So maybe Del Webb's toes. But it's a growth area in the industry. Golf course property, health club, gated security--a snowbird's dream."

"What about the model out front?" Chaz asked.

Gilden's eyes narrowed; he took a breath before he turned to Chaz. "La Corona? That's Dave's baby. Sometimes it changes you, a scare like a heart attack. He came back to work crazy for that project. Hell, I think it gave him something to get well for."

"But you're not building it."

"This company's about volume, not high-dollar properties. He knows that. I'm just waiting him out 'til he comes back down to earth. And it's not as if we don't do low-impact projects. Downtown infill, replacing derelict blocks with new properties--that's good business and good for the planet." Another pat phrase; Gilden probably used it at industry luncheons.

It didn't impress Chaz. "Why display the model, then?"

Gilden cocked his head at Chaz, like a dog at a strange sound. "Well, it's damned pretty. And it shows what we could do. Real estate is half dreams, Agent. Problem with La Corona is, it's all dream. Can't make a living on that."

Chaz's gaze took in the office. To Brady, the gesture said, *And I see you're just getting by.* But Gilden seemed to miss the subtext.

Someone less physical would have looked silly staggering up out of the chair cushions, but Brady planted his feet, gripped the arms, and rose smoothly. If Gilden caught the message in that, he didn't show it. Chaz popped up off the edge of his seat. "Thank you, Mr. Gilden," Brady said. "If we need more information, we'll be in touch." Brady offered his right hand. Gilden, after a moment's hesitation, shook it.

Chaz didn't offer to shake, and Gilden didn't seem to expect it. Brady remembered that Chaz had managed to dodge the handshake with Schumacher, too. It was Chaz's personal version of a cloaking device: a subsonic "please don't touch" pulse. Most people seemed to get it. If it worked every time, Brady would have figured it for another creepy beta skill.

Gilden escorted them to the reception area; the receptionist nodded and smiled, at them and at her boss. She didn't seem nervous under the eye of the company president.

They reached the parking lot before Chaz said, "Sorry."

Brady raised his eyebrows. "What about?"

"I let him know I didn't like him."

Brady laughed, and immediately regretted it, but Chaz didn't seem offended. "Hell, for once in my life I got to be Good Cop. I hardly knew what to do with myself."

Chaz grinned. "Obviously."

"That," Brady continued, "may be the most insecure rich guy I've ever met."

"The chairs?"

"And positioning them facing away from the window, as if Gilden's saying, 'I'm more important than anything out there.' The big empty room, as if he takes up that much space just by breathing. Keeping his back to the corner."

"Also, no computer."

Brady looked a question at him.

"Too important to type anything himself." Chaz stared out across the parking lot narrow-eyed, though the sun was behind them. "But power is about having information right under your hand." He hunched his shoulders suddenly and looked down. "Gilden's symbolism is out of date. He used to be the guy out in front of the pack, but he's been passed and he knows it. He doesn't know how to change to catch up. So he's hanging on tighter to what he does know."

"Good call. So given all those clues, how likely is it he's getting as little personal and professional grief as he says he is?" Brady fished the keys out of his pants pocket.

"Let's get coffee and wi-fi and see what Hafs has on him." Chaz lengthened his stride toward the SUV. "I'll drive."

"*No.*"

Act III

Reyes leaned back in his chair, inhaled the comforting smells of garlic, bread, and simmered tomatoes, and studied as much of the team as was gathered at the round table. So far it was Falkner and Lau, but Chaz had called to say he and Brady were en route.

If Lau was still shaken by the Grossman case, she was hiding it well. She would, though. Lau knew that appearance could substitute for essence, and sometimes become it. Her hands were folded and relaxed on her placemat and her gaze steady on his when she said, "Local media is pretty receptive. If we need to get the profile to the public, they'll run it." She crooked one side of her mouth in a not-smile. "A lot of real estate advertising dollars out there."

"On the other side of the aisle, we've barely scratched the surface of local groups opposed to development." Falkner had draped her coat over her chair and unbuttoned her suit jacket; the neat white V of her blouse glowed in the overhead light. Reyes bet it would be unmarred by tomato sauce at the end of the meal. "If our gamma's been spotted on the fringes of one of them, we haven't found the right one yet."

"So this could take a while," he said.

"It could take catching him red-handed." Falkner shrugged. "But we'd need an impossible quantity of manpower for the stakeout."

Brady and Chaz wound through the restaurant between the tables, seeming unconscious of the diners who turned to watch as they passed. Brady pulled out the chair next to Lau.

"And how was your day?" Lau asked him.

Brady settled on the chair and sighed. "Chaz made me drink mud."

Chaz looked up from hooking his backpack over the chair next to Reyes. "And eat carrot cake!"

"To kill the taste of the mud."

Chaz snorted. "Also, we've had a wi-fi curse all day, so no figures from Hafs."

"I got 'em," Lau said. "I'll summarize; you can do pattern magic on them later."

The waiter arrived before she could begin. Reyes ordered chicken piccata and risotto. Lau never objected to sitting at table with meat eaters, but he thought making her watch him eat veal might try her patience unnecessarily.

Lau asked for her insalata caprese to be served with the entrees, which meant she could talk while everyone else dug into soup or salad. "According to Hafidha, Gilden's industry isn't quite the profit monster it looks at first glance. New houses are going up faster than they're selling. Builders are working on spec, hoping buyers will show up. There's lots of shiny new developments with too many houses sitting vacant."

Reyes speared a mushroom out of his salad and ate it. It was an acceptable salad, but he hoped it was the low point of the meal. "So Gilden Properties probably has cash flow problems."

"More like definitely. The company started a big project in the next county and were turned down by the planning commission. They'll have spent a bundle on surveys, studies, and testing, and none of it is going to show a return." Lau plucked a roll out of the basket in the middle of the table, cracked through the crust with her thumbs, and tore it open. Steam and the smell of yeast rose up.

Brady nodded. "That would explain why Gilden sounded so very pissed off about county planning meetings. That wound's still raw."

"So he might need the insurance payout," Chaz said. Lau handed him half her roll with no sign of prior agreement. The light was too low for Reyes to see if Chaz flushed when he took it, but it seemed likely.

Falkner stirred her minestrone and frowned. "Gilden Properties might need it. Whether it's Gilden or someone else there, who feels responsible...? Or someone who believes his job might be cut if the company starts tightening its belt."

"Speaking of belts," Brady began, and the main courses arrived.

While they ate, Brady gave them his and Chaz's profile of Gilden. He offered it as victimology, but they all knew it could cut either way.

And while he listened, Reyes ate. The brightness of the lemon made saliva spring in his mouth. He felt the thin breading crunch under his teeth, and swallowed tender chicken and rice rich with cheese. How often had he eaten good food with half his attention, the other half on death, destruction, and the allure of the hunt?

Was it wrong to hope for at least as many more occasions to come? Even if he believed in a god, he wouldn't have had the nerve to send that prayer out to it.

When Brady finished, Falkner said, "Gilden's business is full of small fish trying to look big."

"Yeah, but we know Gilden *was* big." Brady raised his fork like a lecturer at the blackboard with a piece of chalk. "And not just financially. Either he's lost weight mighty fast, or he can't afford to replace his suits."

Lau shrugged. "Why replace your wardrobe if you're not done losing weight?"

"Maybe. But he's defensive, and nervous."

Chaz swallowed a hurried mouthful of fettucine and swiped alfredo sauce off his mouth just in time to keep it from reaching his chin. "So is Dave Schumacher. He wasn't comfortable leaving us alone with Gilden."

"Because he knew something about Gilden, or the other way around?" Falkner mused.

"Gilden's Catholic," said Reyes. Brady raised his eyebrows; Reyes answered the implied question. "An employee might have St. Joseph in his office. Putting the statue at the front desk is a statement only the boss can make. Let's find out what Gilden's parish church is."

"A pattern of donations could tell us something," Chaz said.

"So could his parish priest." Reyes managed not to curl his lip. "The confessional is sealed, but a badge trumps a lot of other reservations."

Lau wiped olive oil off her plate with her last bit of roll, ate it, and slid her chair back. "Speaking of which. I'll call the hotel and make sure the rooms are ready."

She swept between the tables toward the front door; diners' heads swiveled again.

Reyes pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "I grilled the arson investigators and went over their evidence. It's all there, and normal. We still have no sign of anomalous activity."

Falkner raised her eyes to his.

Chaz yawned, hugely and suddenly; he covered his mouth with his fork still in his hand, and Reyes was afraid for a moment he'd stab himself in the nose. "Um. Sorry."

Reyes hid his own sympathetic yawn as Lau strode back to the table. "I bear bad news. They've got four rooms for us, not five. Sounds as if the office didn't forward our updated reservation." She shrugged apologetically at Falkner. "And they're full. I could find us another hotel..."

And wrestle with cancellation and the new billing through the Bureau, or expense it and hope to straighten it out later. And the whole team was exhausted, not just Chaz. Reyes shook his head. "Brady, Chaz, you'll share."

Chaz looked outraged. Brady looked resigned. He gave Falkner a one-cornered grin. "I'm outranked."

Chaz sighed; his shoulders dropped theatrically. "Do *not* turn the thermostat down."

Brady raised an eyebrow. "Don't order crappy sci-fi movies off pay-per-view."

"Hey!" Lau said cheerfully. "There might be a body after all!"

"Nah. I'm too tired to kill him."

Reyes signed the bill while the others scraped away from the table. Chaz was the last, wrestling his backpack off his chair. "By the way, happy birthday," Reyes told him.

Chaz's head snapped up, and he blinked. "How did-- Oh." His mouth pressed closed. Then his smile broke out, all the way to his eyes. "Thank you."

"You should have said something. Twenty-five?"

Chaz adjusted the straps of his backpack with unnecessary care. "Not a big deal."

Which is why you smiled when someone remembered. "Many happy returns."

Chaz glanced up again, nodded, and fled, only slowing to pass Falkner coming back from the restroom.

Falkner picked up her coat. "Everything okay?"

"Mmm." Reyes led the way toward the front door.

They paused for a waiter with a tray. Falkner said, "You still think Hafidha's right."

"I do." She had to be. What was the alternative?

At the corner of his eye he could see Falkner watching him. He pretended he couldn't.

The parking lot bordered on a street of tidy, flat-roofed houses. Porch lights were on along the block, and figures with bags and flashlights hurried and clumped on the sidewalk. Trick-or-treaters. In spite of a cloud of unlikely urban myth and municipal regulation, kids still dressed up and extorted candy from the neighbors.

He remembered a year when his dad had taken him around the neighborhood. They'd had to stop early, because his father had a gig that night. That was all right; he'd been happy just to walk next to him for an hour. His father waited on the sidewalk while he went to the doors, and he forgot to say thank you half the time, he was in such a hurry to get back. His dad hadn't insisted on holding his hand; it made him feel grown up and proud. He must have been six or so.

He felt Falkner beside him. "Rebekah announced yesterday that this was her last year."

"How do they decide these things? I'd still be out there if I could get away with it."

Falkner laughed, barely audible. "The continental divide of life. One minute you're racing for the high ground. The next, you're trying to slow your descent."

And no one could dig his heels in hard enough. "Let's go. We're going to be slogging tomorrow."

*

In the dream, there was an old-fashioned diner where Brady's kitchen was supposed to be, and in the dream, he'd expected that. A radio played behind the counter. In one sparkle-vinyl-upholstered booth, Lau sat across from Andre. They both smiled as he walked up. He sat next to Lau. Shouldn't he have sat beside Andre? But if he moved now, it would be obvious, and he'd piss off one of them no matter what. Something on the grill sizzled, louder and louder. No, that was the crackle of fire. The diner was on fire, but he couldn't see flames.

He woke to a line of light between the curtains, the sound of the shower, and his pulse loud and fast in his ears.

Not really a nightmare by his standards.

What he'd dreamed as radio was singing from the bathroom. Now that he was awake, he made out Chaz's breathy tenor:

"If you could find some way to be
A little bit less afraid of me
You'd see the voices that control me from inside my head
Say I shouldn't kill you yet."

"Jesus fucking Twilight Zone," Brady groaned, and pulled the pillow over his head.

*

"You couldn't have been wrong, just this once?" Falkner dropped wearily into a chair in the meeting room Lieutenant Carraldo had lent them.

"About what?" Reyes asked.

Across the room Chaz leaned back from his laptop and rubbed his eyes.

"The slogging. I was hoping it was an empty threat."

Reyes gave her a humorless smile. "You know I don't make those."

"So far, everyone hates Gilden Properties--and nearly the entire real estate development industry--except realtors and car dealers."

"Car dealers?"

"Public transportation is underfunded in Tucson," Chaz answered. He laced his fingers behind his head and arched his back. Reyes heard his spine crack from two yards away. "So sprawl sells cars."

Falkner spread her hands, palm up. "It's an entire competing ecosystem."

"Any reason to hate Gilden more than his competitors?"

Falkner shook her head. "Maybe Brady or Lau will turn something up."

Chaz's laptop played the first few bars of the *Looney Tunes* theme music, and he spun back to it and tapped a key. "Hey, Hafs. Reyes and Falkner are here, too." He turned the computer to face into the room, and rolled his chair to follow.

On screen, Hafidha blinked and shook her head. "Gah. Dizzy much. Okay, Gilden and Schumacher did start out buying houses for quick resale. But they rehabbed them first, and they did the work themselves. Which means, in case you hadn't already leaped ahead, both of them know something about electrical wiring and gas fixtures."

"And you can find instructions for radio-controlled triggers online." Falkner leaned forward, elbows on her knees.

"Except Gilden's not computer-savvy," Chaz objected.

"Are we sure of that?" Reyes asked.

Hafidha rolled her eyes upward. "*Comandante*, he's got one e-mail address. On AOL. It averages nine messages a week, and hasn't even had its spam filter tweaked. Gilden Properties' website is designed, maintained, and hosted by a company in Phoenix. He barely knows my universe exists."

"Hafidha, tell me you didn't read his e-mail."

Even in the contrasty image on Chaz's screen, Reyes could see Hafidha's wounded expression. "I am an honorable pirate. Also not done. It turns out Gilden and Schumacher may have either forged or bought a couple of inspection reports so their rehabs would meet the building codes."

"Turns out?" Reyes didn't look forward to the answer.

"There was a house fire. Wiring short. G. and S. insisted it was in a part of the house they hadn't wired, they produced the inspection report, the inspector who signed off said he'd never been in that house. Somebody was fibbing, but there's no telling who."

"Who died?" Falkner asked, her voice hard.

"Four college kids who were renting the place."

"Could be a trigger." Chaz looked over his shoulder at Reyes, eyes wide.

"Over fifteen years ago?" Hafidha shrugged. "Long incubation, sweetie."

"We can't rule it out," Reyes told her, and the others. "Anything else?"

"More crunchy facts and figures arriving on your communicators as we speak, but that's what stands out. Oh, and Gilden's parish church is St. Agnes. Which, interestingly, is also Schumacher's. Address and GoogleMap uploading..." She raised her eyebrows and focused on something just off camera. "...Now."

Hurrying footsteps in the hall; the door swept open on Lieutenant Carraldo, glaring, her jaw working. "One of Gilden's sites." She stopped for breath.

"Another explosion?" Reyes asked. But they'd all happened at night.

Carraldo shook her head fiercely. "It's been invaded."

*

Three empty former schoolbuses stood angled across the newly-paved streets of what the billboard at the gate declared would be Lago Oro Active Living Resort. Brady had to admit there was such a thing as passive living, but he doubted that was in the designers' heads.

Tucson PD blocked the entry with cruisers, party lights revolving; a third cruiser boxed in another bus on the street, and an officer had the driver

sitting on the curb with his hands on his head. The passengers shouted out the windows; Brady heard a toddler crying among them. Two officers with rifles blocked the bus doors.

"That's going to look good when the news vans get here," Lau sighed.

"Who called 'em?"

"Police scanner, Danny. Six o'clock news will lead with the Tucson police threatening a bus full of homeless people."

"And rounding up more." Brady turned to look back at the development where uniforms were searching among the unfinished houses for the passengers of the other three buses.

A dark SUV pulled into the curb against traffic. *Tick, tick, tick*, Brady thought, and was surprised when the front passenger door opened at one and a half. But that turned out to be Carraldo. The other doors opened on three and disgorged Reyes, Falkner, and Chaz.

"What do we know?" Reyes asked as soon as they were in earshot.

"People turned away from homeless shelters," Lau said. "Mostly for lack of room, but there'll be a few in the mix refused for drug or alcohol use or previous violent episodes. The buses were rented and driven by members of a group calling themselves The New Commons, according to the one on the curb there."

"History majors?" Reyes asked, one satirical eyebrow flying. Lau shrugged.

Carraldo braced her hands on her hips and surveyed the landscape. "It's like the chickens came home to roost. You can bet some of these people used to live in buildings Gilden knocked down."

"I thought Gilden stuck to big scrape-and-build stuff like this." Brady nodded at the houses.

"Branching out." Carraldo gave him a grin full of not-amused. "They bought a downtown block and bulldozed it for an office complex. Got a shitload of tax breaks for neighborhood redevelopment."

Reyes turned to Carraldo. "Lieutenant, it's vital we get everyone out of here before nightfall."

"We were going to do that anyway. Got a particular reason?"

"Because this will attract the arsonist's attention."

Carraldo reared back, frowning. "He doesn't target inhabited buildings. He'll hit anywhere *but* here."

Over Reyes's shoulder, Brady saw Chaz's head turn, his eyes narrow. But it was Falkner who spoke. "This type of UNSUB doesn't stop at property damage. The addition of potential victims to one of his usual targets-- It increases the chance that he'll escalate before we can catch him."

Carraldo pulled her cell out of her jacket pocket. "I'll get us more manpower. Oh, for fuck's sake."

Brady turned to follow her gaze. The first of the TV news trucks was pulling up beyond the cruisers.

Carraldo loped off, probably to organize a barricade. Brady heard sirens approaching.

"Guys," Chaz said. "She's right. He *doesn't* target inhabited buildings."

"We can't count on that--" Falkner began.

"No, no, no." Chaz's hands curved tense in front of his face, as if he were holding his thought and trying to pass it like a basketball. "We've been assuming he's striking out at the developments. But what if it's that he's *not* striking out at *people*?"

It took a second to decode. "The anomaly causes pain," Reyes said.

"But there *isn't* any pain here. Or anything anomalous. What if he's resisting it?"

Brady shook his head. "You said it yourself: If we've got it, we use it."

"If we're not aware we're doing harm, sure. But he is. A gamma who sets five fires and doesn't cause one injury? That has to be it."

"Why does it *have* to be?" Brady snapped. "Maybe he doesn't know what he wants yet. Maybe this is dress rehearsal. God damn it, Chaz, get fucking *serious*."

The team stared at him--an interesting mix of expressions. It was Chaz's blank, still face that made him play his own words back, feel the fury that

balled his fists in his pockets and clenched his jaw.

Come on, asshole. Apologize. But his throat was too tight with anger to work.

Reyes broke the silence. "Let's help get these people out of here. No one goes in alone; look out for weapons and watch your backs."

Brady turned and headed toward the houses. If he was lucky, someone would try to pull a knife on him.

*

The camera crews managed to slip past the police, of course. Reyes was there when the leader of the group was brought out of a house between two police officers. "We are the New Commons!" he shouted to the reporters as he was hurried past. "Poverty is a crime committed by the rich!"

The cops tucked him neatly in the back of a patrol car. Rank, it seemed, had privileges even within the crime of trespassing; other organizers and the homeless squatters who resisted were being cuffed and loaded into police vans as they were found. The quiet ones were being held on their own buses.

Carraldo trudged over to Reyes. "You want to talk to him?"

She must have seen him staring at the car. "He hasn't lawyered up?"

Carraldo blew air through her lips, a substitute for laughter. "You know better than that. The point of this kind of thing is the statement. You think he might be our guy?"

"No. But he might know him."

When Reyes slid into the patrol car's back seat, the man next to him straightened as much as he could with his hands cuffed behind him, and stared forward as if Reyes wasn't there.

"My name is Stephen Reyes. I'm with the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit."

That startled the man, though he tried to hide it. He was in his early thirties, with short light-brown hair and tortoiseshell glasses. He had a runner's muscular thinness and a smoker's cough, though Reyes couldn't smell cigarette smoke on him.

"Are we domestic terrorists now?" The man's jaw clenched. "I thought we were just poor people."

Reyes laid his hands relaxed on his thighs and watched the roundup out the windshield as he said, "You may have got your glasses frames through a charity, and someone might have put an almost-new Calvin Klein shirt in a shelter donation box. But your haircut cost you at least twenty-five dollars."

At the corner of his vision, Reyes saw the man's head turn. "I'm not a hypocrite."

"No, you're a man who almost despairs of the world and humanity. There are days you can hardly stand to walk out your door, the injustice and inequity sickens you so. You need to do more than give money to charities so they can pay salaries to administrators. You feel the world's time is running out."

The mixture of hope and sorrow on the man's face almost made Reyes feel guilty. It was only a canned profile of a kind of civil disobedience. But the man felt understood.

"What's your name?" Reyes asked him.

"Jan Kellogg."

"Mr. Kellogg. We're looking for someone who's potentially very dangerous. He may have gravitated to your movement, or to groups opposing development. But his motivations aren't political."

Kellogg shrugged. "I don't know why he'd be with us, then."

Reyes nodded, as if Kellogg had told him something useful. "He seems socially well-adjusted at first. But on better acquaintance, you'd notice he's frightened, insecure. He'll have mood swings--one moment he's outgoing, pleasant, but the next he's angry, or so depressed he can hardly speak. When he's angry, he may urge violent solutions. His metaphors are about burning or explosions. The person we're looking for has experience with electrical work. And he may have lost weight suddenly."

As Reyes spoke, he was aware of how much of his list fit Arthur Gilden.

Kellogg shook his head. "No. That doesn't sound like one of us."

Reyes slid his card case out of his pocket, thumbed out a card, and held it up. "May I put this in your shirt pocket, Mr. Kellogg? If you remember anything

that might help, I'd appreciate a call."

Kellogg nodded. Reyes put the card in his pocket and said, "Thank you."

He slid out of the patrol car and went in search of Carraldo. "Nothing," he told her. "Will you do me a favor?"

She eyed him warily. Reyes was reminded of Pauley. "Depends."

"Get him off with a warning, will you?"

She gave her growling laugh again. "You sweet-talked me into it."

*

The mountains to the west of town looked like a stage backdrop done by a grade-school class: pointy, lopsided, irrational. The sun glared red above them by the time the last of the buses and the police vans pulled out with their sorry loads.

The grind of power screwdrivers rose up from the empty buildings. Gilden Properties had sent a maintenance crew to board up the houses that had been broken into. Police cars parked at the ends of the streets, waiting for the crews to finish.

Brady beat dust out of his shirt. His jacket was in the SUV; with the sun dropping, he'd want it soon. He felt filthy and exhausted and revolted with himself and the universe. Kicking homeless people out of squats was not his idea of a good day's work.

At the gate, on a low wall by the unfinished guard station, someone sat folded up, knees under chin. Brady walked over, and Chaz looked up, silent.

"I'm sorry," Brady said. "I heard... Melinda Grossman turned a goddamn gun on herself rather than listen to the Thing. Then you describe a gamma who's holding out against it. And I thought of..."

Chaz nodded. "I know."

Brady blew out a long breath and sat down hard next to Chaz. "In a shitty movie, this is where I'd pull an old photo out of my wallet."

That made Chaz smile. "You can if you want to." He unfolded enough to put his feet on the ground and wrap his arms around his ribs. "You're bleeding."

"Huh?"

Chaz tapped his own temple, left side at the hairline.

Brady probed, felt the scrape under his fingers. "Oh. Right. The percentage of mentally ill people among the homeless is still pretty high." If he hadn't felt it earlier, it would keep. "You eat lately?"

Chaz's mouth twisted.

"Sorry again."

It was Chaz's turn to sigh. "No, you're right. I kind of made it your problem." He pulled a packet of cheese and peanut butter crackers out of his pocket. "I've been working on these."

"Want me to get us the hell out of here?"

Lau came around the corner of the guard station, pushing her hair back with both hands. "Well, we've questioned everyone who might conceivably have contact with the host. Big zero. It has to be someone with a car or truck."

"No public transportation." Chaz sounded disapproving.

"And they had to bus those people out here to have a demonstration. Oh, *god*, today was a waste." Lau scrubbed her eyes and raked her hands through her hair again, a single motion. "Can we go home yet?"

"Not 'til we find the bad guy," said Chaz.

Brady nodded. The bad guy. It wouldn't help to think of him as anything else.

*

Reyes woke to the burring of the phone on the bedside table. He was aware instantly that he was in a hotel room, that this was Tucson, and that it was too early for this to be his wake-up call. "Reyes," he said into the receiver, his voice cracking.

"It's Carraldo. You were right--he hit Lago Oro."

It took a moment for Reyes to put the name together with the scene of yesterday's demonstration. "We cleared it out."

Silence on the line, just a little too long. Then Carraldo said, "We found four bodies."

He was out of bed before the reciever hit the cradle. His other hand reached for his cell.

*

Lago Oro was changed by gray morning light, the pall of smoke, the pools of oily water and muddy lots. The streets were jammed with fire trucks, paramedics' units, police cars, and a panel van with the logo of the Pima County Coroner. Reyes thought of Brady's comment that developers didn't think about emergency response when they designed access. The community's single entrance and narrow winding streets had slowed the fire trucks down.

The team scattered without consultation to work their areas of expertise. Reyes went straight to the blackened house where the coroner's van waited, where the camera flashes were most frequent.

The blasts had occurred in houses on the east ends of three blocks. The wind was still blowing east to west. Shrapnel and sparks had carried the fire from one close-set house to another. In several others, escaping gas had ignited, blown the house, and spread the fire further. The devastation made their first scene look like a Homecoming bonfire.

Reyes didn't believe in coincidence. The gamma hit Lago Oro because of what had happened there yesterday. But had that caused the escalation, too? And had he meant to kill?

Carraldo met him at the tape barrier. "The explosion was set in the next house over, then caught this one on fire. From the location of the bodies..." Her eyes dropped, but only for a moment. She'd been a long time at this job. "They probably died of smoke inhalation. We haven't been able to determine yet if they entered the house after we cleared the demonstrators, maybe found a way in the repair crews had missed. Or if--" She swallowed, and continued, "--they were already hidden when the building was boarded up."

He'd been at the job a long time, too, but not long enough that the possibility didn't turn him sick and cold. "Any I.D. yet?"

Carraldo shook her head. "Two adults, two children: a boy and a girl." She jerked her head for Reyes to follow her ten feet down the barricade to a tarp spread on the ground.

It was like a collection of artifacts from an archaeological dig, but without the cleansing distance of time. A half-burned sneaker. Plastic water bottles deformed by heat. A charred windbreaker. A pink nylon backpack, partly blackened and its plastic character decals melted, part eerily preserved and whole. It might have been protected by a body on top of it. The pictures were of cartoon girls who were almost, but not quite, the Disney princesses.

"Everything here was bought in Mexico," Carraldo said.

"Illegals." The word was hard to say in this context.

"If they were with the demonstrators, it would make sense. The shelters are supposed to report 'em."

Reyes stared down at the contents of the tarp. "Yesterday was the Feast of All Saints. It used to be called the Feast of All Martyrs." He raised his eyes to Carraldo. "I wonder if our UNSUB knows that?"

"He was aware they were in the house? It was deliberate?"

"Maybe. Or it wasn't. And when he finds out, it will color the way he sees his actions." Reyes wiped his hands on his thighs. They felt ashy, though he didn't recall touching anything. "Put the M.E. to work identifying the victims as quickly as you can. I'll send my media specialist to consult on this. We want the UNSUB to know he killed, and who, as soon as possible."

"You said killing is what these guys want."

"This one may be different."

Reyes found Lau alone at the end of the first burned block, intent on thumbing notes into her BlackBerry. His steps crunched across the dirt, but she didn't look up.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yep." She paused just long enough to make him believe that was all he'd get. "I got the details from one of the investigators." A long, shaky breath; then she said, "I was one of the last people off the site." She looked away from her notes, examined a thumbnail, scratched at the cuticle.

"You didn't kill Melinda and Carol Grossman."

Lau flinched. She glanced up, met his eyes, dropped her gaze again. "I didn't save them."

"That's not our job."

This time when she looked up, she didn't look away.

"We save lives by stopping the people who will take them. But the job is about stopping, not saving. If we can stop a host without taking a life, we should. We rarely can."

Lau took another long, slow breath, closed her eyes, and nodded.

"I need you to work this. We have to let the host know who he's killed, personalize the deaths for him. If Chaz is right, it may bring him out from under cover."

"And their family should know what happened to them." Her shoulders squared.

Falkner would have started with that. The hunt gave him tunnel vision.

Reyes had taken three steps when Lau said, "Hah. Boss?"

He looked back, and Lau waved her BlackBerry. "Chaz says none of the houses where the fires started were broken into yesterday."

It took him a moment's visualization. "Which means they weren't boarded up. Easier to get access."

"Bingo."

"Good work," he said, "both of you. Keep me posted."

Act IV

Father Thomas Fiore met Brady and Reyes at the St. Agnes parish offices. Brady wondered if Catholics had a special name for church offices. Reyes would know. Given the tilt of Reyes's head, Brady decided not to ask.

The room was small, white-plastered, and crowded with furniture: a desk, wooden chairs, overloaded bookshelves, two four-drawer filing cabinets. The dark wood crucifix on the wall by the door might have dated, like the church, to the 1940s. A casement window beside the desk opened into a

courtyard; Brady could see the dust-greens and dull purple of yucca and prickly pear, and a rank-looking clump of Mexican hat blooming crimson and yellow.

Father Fiore was tanned, white-haired, and would have made a good host for a show on the Outdoor Life Network. Fishers of Men Who Fish, maybe. He had the the confident, upright posture and flexible voice of someone used to living in public.

"Father Fiore," Reyes began, "we realize there are things you can't tell us about your parishioners. What we're looking for are things you may have observed as a neighbor and a friend, not as a priest."

Father Fiore showed them a half-smile. "I'm afraid I'm always a priest, gentlemen."

"Of course." Reyes was brisk; the fingers of his left hand drummed lightly on his thigh. "But you've chosen a--not worldly, but certainly public--career in the church. In charge of a wealthy parish in a diocese where your voice has a lot of weight in the community. You're not afraid to share your opinions."

Father Fiore lowered his chin and eyed Reyes through the tops of his glasses. "This is a conservative congregation, Agent Reyes. I give my parishioners a voice in a liberal community in which they don't always feel heard."

"Good," Brady said. "You can tell us what your congregation says about Arthur Gilden and Dave Schumacher."

"Mr. Gilden's a good Catholic--"

"Who donated half the necessary funds to buy the land for your new church." Reyes smiled, sleepy-eyed. "And whose company was then hired to acquire and survey the land and build the complex."

"After a public bidding process," Father Fiore said stiffly.

"Father Fiore," Brady interrupted, "we're here because four people died last night in an explosion in a Gilden Properties development. We believe Mr. Gilden is being targeted. He and Mr. Schumacher may be in danger. We need you to tell us the things other people can't, so we can help them."

Reyes sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach. Done for now. Brady considered kicking him in the ankle. Instead, he leaned forward, clasped his fingers together over his knees, and packed as much earnest and sympathetic in his face as he could.

The priest sighed. "Arthur's a good man. He's driven, single-minded--worldly, yes--but he gives back to the community. He donates to civic events. Gilden Properties is one of the sponsors of the All Souls' Parade every year. I believe he's a good Christian."

"Today is the Feast of All Souls," Reyes observed.

"Yes, tonight's service. The parade is on Sunday night, downtown. I'm afraid it has more to do with Halloween and Dia de los Muertos than a Catholic feast day, but the Church isn't directly involved."

Brady shifted in his chair to bring Father Fiore's attention back to him. "What's Dave Schumacher like?"

"Friendly, outgoing. A good negotiator. People like working under him on parish business."

"Donations?"

"He and his wife support the church with money, and time. Dave collects toys to repair, that we donate to children's homes in Mexico. He started the program a few years ago."

"Gluing bits back on, repainting, that kind of thing?"

"Mostly battery-powered toys. Robots, cars, those--what are they called, Leap Frogs? The learning games."

"How is Gilden's health?" Brady asked. "Any major illnesses recently? Any significant loss or trauma?"

"No. Arthur's been overweight for as long as I've known him, but he's very healthy. I was worried about Dave last year. He was under a lot of stress, and finally had the heart attack. But he's been much better since then. He and his wife..."

"What is it, Father?" Reyes's voice was mild.

"Nothing to do with your investigation. I will say that Dave recovered his spirits and his health both. He wants to offer an *ex voto* for his recovery, to Saint John of God, Saint Teresa de Avila, and Saint Barbara. He was very excited when he proposed it to me."

Reyes leaned sharply forward. "What was it to be?"

"He didn't say."

"And when did he come to you?"

"I... Several months ago, I believe."

Reyes curled his fingers over his knees. "Has Mr. Schumacher spoken to you about it recently?"

"Not... A month ago, perhaps."

"When he said there was a hitch, that it might take longer to fulfill his vow than he'd planned."

Father Fiore stared at Reyes. Brady recognized the "how did you read my mind?" look.

"Has Schumacher's attendance at Mass dropped off, Father?" Reyes asked.

"He's...he's very busy." Father Fiore's voice died away.

"Thank you, Father," Reyes said. "We'll call you if we have any more questions."

Outside, Brady said, "Well, that would have been easier if I'd had a lapsed Catholic along. Oh, wait."

Reyes raised both eyebrows.

"You did antagonize the witness," Brady told him.

"Don't you like being Good Cop?"

"Second time this week," Brady sighed.

Reyes said, "Call Hafidha and get Schumacher's address. I want to talk to his wife."

"Because of where the priest stopped talking?" Brady pulled out his phone.

"The model development that Gilden said was Schumacher's dream project, La Corona. He proposed it to Gilden after his heart attack."

"You think that's what Schumacher was telling the priest about."

"I think that's his votive offering. Saint John of God is invoked against heart attack, Teresa of Avila against sickness. Barbara is the patron of builders. And for a little irony, John and Barbara are also patrons of firefighters, but I think that's incidental. Schumacher wanted to build La Corona as an offering to them, but Gilden is blocking him. Now, why did he choose that to offer?"

"It's what he does."

"It may also be what he *did.* He may see it as atonement for something related to his work."

"The house fire?"

"Maybe. Hafidha's right, though. That's a long way back."

"I can understand the heart attack as the crack for the anomaly. But not being able to make an offering? Not enough of a trigger."

"The most powerful, all-inclusive mythologies gammas present are religious ones. Dave Schumacher's a wealthy, educated man, but if he's a devout Catholic, he believes in those three saints the way you believe in gravity. They're waiting for him to fulfill his vow."

"What happens if he can't?"

Reyes's mouth worked. "He'll find something else he thinks will be acceptable in their sight."

The Schumacher house was two miles away, a rambling Santa Fe-style structure in the foothills of the Catalinas with a view over the city-filled valley. They rang the bell three times. There was no answer.

Brady called the number Hafidha had given them. He could hear it ring inside. No shadow passed a window, no one picked up. He hung up when the answering machine kicked in.

"We'll keep trying her," Reyes said. "He has no reason to harm her."

"If he's our firebug at all. But if he is, he may have seen the news, and decided after four bodies he had no way out but murder-suicide."

Reyes shook his head. "He tried to confine the damage to uninhabited places. He even stuck to Gilden projects, things he could think of as his. That kind of murder doesn't feel right."

Brady opened the driver's side door of the SUV. "You're gambling."

"We always gamble." Reyes climbed into the passenger's seat and slammed the door.

Brady waited until he'd navigated the curving drive. "Well, this whole trip is based on one."

Reyes's head turned; he waited, silent. Brady hated that Reyes couldn't just ask, "What do you mean?" like a normal person.

"Hafidha says we've got a gamma. What if she's wrong?"

Reyes stared silent at the road.

Brady gathered his nerve, but his voice came out thinner than usual when he said, "What if she's lying?"

If it was inconceivable, Reyes would jump down his throat.

Reyes continued to stare out the windshield.

"It's occurred to you," Brady said.

"Yes."

"And?"

"And right now it doesn't change how we work this case."

It would certainly change their homecoming.

They wound down out of the foothills into the endless strip-mall-and-office-park development that marked Tucson's last few decades of growth. Brady stopped at a red light beside a Jeep loaded with four high school boys. Based on their face paint and indecipherable shouting, they were working themselves up for a football game.

He'd been stupid and hormonal once himself. "If you're right about the potential mythology behind this... What's the Feast of All Souls?"

Reyes folded his hands behind his head and stretched, and Brady was reminded of Chaz. "There are two feasts of the Church, back to back. The

Feast of All Saints celebrates those who lived sinless lives and achieved the beatific vision. It once honored the martyrs of the Church. The Feast of All Souls remembers those who have died and are held back from heaven by their sins in life, but who can be saved from Purgatory by the prayers of the living. The faithful departed."

"Which do you think our guy sees himself as?"

"Saint, martyr, or faithful departed?"

"Or lost soul?"

Reyes closed his eyes. "Let's find him and ask."

*

The morning news broadcasts and papers led with the story of a Nicaraguan family's death in the fire at the Lago Oro development in South Tucson. The Acostas, Jorge and Luisa, and their children Barbara and Esteban. Lau had chased down a family photo, through some unimaginable means: four people dressed up and smiling in front of a dry plaza fountain. Now they smiled from the cover of the *Daily Star* and the kitchen TVs of a few thousand Arizona households.

The Schumachers' phone went unanswered through the morning.

"We don't have enough for a warrant," Carraldo told Reyes. She sat on the edge of the center table in their makeshift office, swinging one leg and cupping her coffee mug in both hands.

"If 9-1-1 gets a call saying there was screaming heard at that address, they'll have to dispatch someone to check."

"And the 9-1-1 log would show it was your phone the call was made from, and you'd be fucked."

Reyes didn't mention that he--or rather, Hafidha--could get around that if it became necessary. He didn't mean to look over at Chaz, either, who might have heard the conversation. But he was aware that the rustling and crunching of Chaz mowing his way through a family-size bag of Fritos had stopped.

"Hah!" Chaz kicked himself and his rolling chair away from the desk. He was grinning. "And also, hah!"

"What?" Reyes rounded the table and leaned over Chaz's laptop.

Chaz rolled up to the desk again, and Reyes remembered and edged away to give him room. "Here's the list of Gilden Properties' acquisitions for last year, and the amounts paid." Chaz tapped a bony finger on columns of property descriptions, dates, numbers. His eyes were on the screen, focused sharp, and he wore a half-smile. "They've added the purchase costs of the acquisitions into the amount paid. Which they aren't supposed to do, but that's a wrist-slap. *Unless* you do it to hide something."

He clicked keys; another list scrolled up the screen. "Among those costs are payments for environmental surveys. All to the same company: Santa Rita Resources. Gilden Properties' acquisitions division paid them five hundred ninety-seven thousand, three hundred and fifty dollars over the last year."

Chaz hit another key. The screen blanked, and filled up with a list of five accounts and dollar amounts. "Santa Rita Resources paid consulting fees to five companies. Companies owned by people with relatives on county planning boards." Chaz scrolled down to the total. "Five hundred ninety-seven thousand, three hundred and fifty dollars." He looked triumphantly up at Reyes.

"They presented cooked environmental surveys and paid board members to look the other way." Reyes felt his heart speed up, his breath quicken. *Thrill of the hunt.*

"And I'll bet Santa Rita Resources is made of paper. Or in this case, electrons. This went on until six months ago. When Schumacher--the vice president of acquisitions--had a heart attack. The stress of hiding this may have contributed."

"This was what La Corona was an offering for. Not just a thank-you for saving his life. An act of repentance." Reyes stepped back and looked down at Chaz. "Would anyone else have found this?"

"You mean, who didn't--" Chaz's eyes cut away to Carraldo for an instant, and back to Reyes. "--have Bureau access? Not right away. But it would have come out." Chaz shrugged. "And Gilden could say he hadn't known. Maybe he didn't. But Schumacher couldn't have claimed ignorance. Gilden must have promised Schumacher the company would take care of him."

Reyes's cell shivered in his breast pocket. It was Falkner.

"Schumacher's wife just pulled in the driveway," she said without preamble. "No sign of Schumacher, unless she's got him in the trunk."

"Hold position," he told her. "We'll be there in fifteen."

Chaz had already slapped his laptop closed and grabbed his backpack.

Carraldo slid off the table edge. "Want me along?"

Reyes shook his head. "Right now, it's a witness interview. If that changes, I'll call in the cavalry."

*

Chaz stayed in the car out front to watch the house; Brady and Lau were parked on the next street up the hill with a view of the rear of the property. Reyes and Falkner went inside, into the wide, high-ceilinged rooms with Navajo rugs, Mexican pottery, dark red leather upholstery, and Toni Schumacher upright and impenetrably smiling in her living room.

Schumacher wiped her palms on the thighs of her denim slacks. Her hands disagreed with her face, with its confident fundraising-dinner expression. She was younger than her husband by seven years, but not, Reyes thought, a trophy wife. Her pullover was cashmere, and the silver-gray pearls in her earlobes were tasteful but large. She wore a floral perfume, applied sparingly; it came and went in his nose like a restless ghost. A fine gold chain circled her neck and disappeared under the collar of her sweater. Reyes was sure there was a crucifix on it.

"Ms. Schumacher, can you tell us where your husband is?" Falkner asked, in a voice that said *This is purely routine.*

"We have a cabin up north, outside Alpine. He goes there to relax on weekends. I'm afraid there's no phone."

"And you know he's there?"

"Yes. He left a note on my cell."

"What time was that?"

"Yesterday morning. I'm not sure of the time. I deleted it after I read it."

Falkner, divinely calm, said, "That's all right. Your carrier will have a record."

Schumacher's face paled, then flushed.

"You were away from home last night. Can you tell us where?"

"I was at a church retreat," Schumacher said firmly, without a moment's pause.

Schumacher's purse lay on one of the stools at the kitchen breakfast bar, halfway between the garage door and the living room where they sat. If she'd had an overnight bag, it would be on the floor beside it; or the bag and the purse would both be put away.

Toni Schumacher was an extraordinarily bad liar. Or was Reyes just used to dealing with good ones? He shifted his weight toward Schumacher, just enough to push her boundaries. "Who else was there?"

Schumacher slid her palms along her thighs again. "I don't know why you're prying into my business. Am I accused of something?"

Falkner asked gently, "Don't you want to ask the same thing about your husband?"

Schumacher froze. She was wondering if she'd made a mistake. Falkner tilted back a little, as if she'd won a point. The leather upholstery creaked.

Reyes said, "When was the last time you saw your husband?"

A beat before Schumacher turned from Falkner to Reyes. She no longer knew who was the threat. "I don't have to answer any of these questions."

Falkner met Reyes's eyes. He gave her the nod. It would be better coming from her.

Falkner leaned forward, elbows on knees. Schumacher sat stiffly upright on her leather sofa. "I understand if you'd rather not answer questions. Let me tell you what we think happened, instead." Her voice was gentle, pitched low; the intonations and inflections were those of sympathy, of comfort. It was the way she talked to the survivors.

"Your husband helped Arthur Gilden bribe officials to get land deals approved. Keeping that secret put a strain on your marriage, and led to his heart attack."

Schumacher folded her hands in her lap. Her face was settled in a half-smile. Distress tolerance skills, for when you couldn't alter the situation.

"But the heart attack was a wake-up call," Falkner continued. "Dave seemed determined to change. Your relationship improved. And he was excited about the La Corona project. If he could shift the company's focus to greener, more responsible development, he felt it would make up for some of the damage he'd helped do.

"Then he presented the project to Gilden. When he realized Gilden was never going to approve it, Dave became moody, depressed, angry. He stopped going to Mass. He began to eat constantly."

Schumacher raised one hand to her mouth, caught herself, and let it fall again. She nibbled at her lower lip instead.

Falkner didn't look away from Schumacher's face. "You asked him to see a doctor, but he wouldn't. You've suspected he's hiding something from you.

"Yesterday afternoon he phoned you. Ms. Schumacher--Toni--what did he say? What made you afraid to come home last night?"

Schumacher's eyes jerked to Falkner's. Her breathing was irregular and shallow. Reyes saw her throat work. "He said good-bye."

*

Brady and Lau met the rest of the team on the driveway outside Schumacher's house.

"He's got an endgame," Reyes said. "We don't know what it is, or how long we've got before he plays it."

He might have done it already. Brady knew the thought had crossed everybody's mind. It just wasn't useful to say out loud.

"Lau, Falkner," Reyes continued, "see if you can raise someone and get a warrant to search Schumacher's office. If you explain things to Gilden the right way, he'll help."

Meaning, Brady thought, that it might be good to remind Gilden how much they had on him already. Lau got it, too, based on her crooked smile.

"I'll drive," Falkner said. "You phone." She turned toward one of the SUVs, her black coat belling behind her. Lau loped after, BlackBerry in her hand.

Reyes jerked his head in Brady's direction. "Brady, Chaz, we'll search the house. Look for anything to suggest where he's going, or what he'll do."

The house's interior was what Brady had expected. Ms. Schumacher wasn't, quite. She sat on her couch straight-backed, her hands pressed together between her knees, her reddened eyes fixed on the wall across the room. The fireplace wall, with its projecting mantel and handsome freestanding Taxco silver cross.

"Ms. Schumacher, I'm Agent Daniel Brady." Schumacher turned her head to him when he spoke. Something about it suggested she was evaluating each motion: *Is this the normal thing to do? And this?* "We're going to look for clues your husband might have left about where he meant to go. Have you thought of anything else that might help us?"

Schumacher breathed in, held it. "I keep remembering...stupid things. We quarreled over the garage door remote. The one in his truck didn't work the day I drove it. I got soaking wet, and I asked him was it so hard to remember to replace the batteries... He called me petty. I guess I was, wasn't I?"

"When was that?"

She frowned. "I think--it must have been early October. It almost never rains in October. I didn't have an umbrella."

About the time the fires started. Dave Schumacher would be frustrated, angry, pushed to the edge. But he hadn't hurt his wife.

Chaz appeared at the kitchen door, knuckles white around the knob.

"Thank you, Ms. Schumacher," Brady said, and went to join him.

Dave Schumacher had a workshop off the kitchen. It was arranged with the near-obsessive tidiness Brady had seen in a lot of engineers' offices. Two soldering irons, their bases fixed to the workbench, with replacement tips racked beside them; coils of solder of various weights; screwdrivers and pliers hung from pegboard in order of size. Stacking bins by the bench held electronic toys, sorted by type.

Not all the toys were put away. Brady saw a scarlet Indy car jammed nose-first under the workbench. A monster truck, overturned, lay behind the door. A dune buggy in the middle of the floor looked as if a toy tree had fallen on it and broken its back, scattering plastic body fragments across the tile.

He looked up to find Chaz's eyes on him. "Rage?" Brady suggested.

Chaz shook his head and pointed to the litter on the workbench.

"What are those?'

Chaz plucked a pen out of his jacket pocket and used it to lift one: a kidney-shaped box of black plastic, studded with big buttons in red, yellow, green. Half the box hung splintered at the end of exposed wire. "Transmitters," Chaz said. "I think he smashed them with a hammer. All of them."

Brady looked again at the radio-controlled cars on the floor, the broken controllers on the workbench. Everything under a month of undisturbed dust.

"The cars kept moving," Chaz said, a horror-movie flatness in his voice. "He couldn't make them stop. He thought maybe he had the wrong transmitter, but none of them worked on the cars. He broke the transmitters, all of them. They *still* didn't stop. And finally he stomped on the car." Chaz raised his eyes from the wreckage to Brady. "Not rage. Fear."

Brady could feel it secondhand, standing amid the remains of Dave Schumacher's conversion. "He didn't need a transmitter to set off the explosions."

Chaz shook his head.

Radio-controlled explosions. Mining, road-building, special effects. Schumacher's manifestation could turn them into serial carnage.

Except Schumacher meant to prevent it. "He can't do it." Brady realized he'd spoken aloud. "He can't stop himself. The anomaly doesn't work like that."

Chaz opened his mouth. It took two tries before he got out, "Eddie Cieslewicz did. And Melinda Grossman."

"Not like this. Not-- If Reyes is right, hell, this is *premeditated.* The anomaly keeps the host alive."

"Not exactly." Chaz's voice was soft; it made Brady notice how harsh his own had been. "The anomaly makes the host stronger. Tougher. So it's easier for the host to keep *itself* alive."

Brady stared at Chaz's down-turned profile. He was giving Brady a sort of privacy.

The host kept itself alive. Was that it? Andre was a fighter. Had fighting betrayed him and made him a monster? Or was Melinda Grossman, who'd resisted the very will to live, the determined one?

"Come on," Brady said. "We've got to find this guy." He nodded at the broken controller box. "Before he does that to himself."

Act V

A successful white-collar criminal knew how to hide his trail. A white-collar criminal who became a host kept his skills.

Toni Schumacher and her house had told the team everything they could, Reyes was sure. He left his card with her just in case, and reminded her once more that they meant to save her husband's life.

Falkner and Lau had drawn a blank at Schumacher's office. Gilden last saw Schumacher on Wednesday afternoon. Now Falkner, Brady, and Reyes plowed through contact numbers of Gilden Properties employees, trying to find someone who had seen Dave Schumacher since then. Lau did the same with the congregation of St. Agnes Catholic Church.

Chaz perched on the rolling chair at the desk, his laptop open, combing through files Hafidha had sent for Schumacher's patterns of behavior, relationships, associations with places or dates or times. Three pyramids of tiny white sugar skulls, like miniature stacked cannonballs, lined the edge of the desk next to him. There'd been four originally.

You can't save everyone. James Cauldwell had said that, back in Omaha. They hadn't saved Cauldwell. If Dave Schumacher didn't want to be saved, did that change anything? As a child, Reyes had learned despair was a sin. Now he knew it was an illness. But it wasn't always curable.

The souls of the faithful dead were trapped in Purgatory, waiting for the prayers of the living to free them. The hosts were trapped in their own bodies by the anomaly, and nothing so far had released them except death. But Schumacher didn't know that. His mythology included redemption.

They had to remind him of it.

Falkner swept through the door, PDA in her fist. "An assistant in the Public Relations department--Schumacher was there on Friday afternoon. Gilden

Properties lends projection equipment to the All Souls parade every year. Schumacher came by and offered to deliver the hardware. The assistant pulled the file to see who it should go to, then went with Schumacher to the storage room. When she got back to her desk, she couldn't find the file. She thought Schumacher might have taken it by accident."

"He's sweeping his backtrail," Reyes said.

Chaz's fingers chattered on the keyboard. "Guys?" He looked up, eyebrows canted, mouth open. "This isn't good." He turned the screen toward the room.

He'd called up the website of the All Souls parade, with photos from the previous year.

Photos of the finale and a stage full of fire effects.

*

The projectionist shrugged at Brady. The silver chain that looped from earring to earring in his right ear shivered, catching the bounced light from the projector and the street. "I didn't take delivery. All I do is set it up and run it."

The images glowed, immense, faintly patterned by the texture of brick under paint, on the blank white side of the four-story building that edged the vacant lot. New and old, color and black and white: photos of dead loved ones sent by people all over town, to be included in the slowly-changing display. A community shrine of remembrance, a citywide *ofrenda*. Someone's father, someone's sister, someone's high school best friend, a child, an old woman. They belonged to no one and everyone.

Brady would have slowed down to admire the staging, if he didn't have more immediate life and death on his mind.

Chaz shifted from foot to foot next to him, head craning. The streetlights reflected up to show people on the roof of the building across Toole Avenue. The sidewalks were lined with spectators waiting for the parade to arrive.

The bomb squad had already examined the projector and found it untampered with. Schumacher wasn't going to target them from a rooftop with a rifle. But it was one thing to know that, and another to tell it to the cold spot on the back of Brady's neck.

The doubled blare of a train horn made him jump. The tracks sliced through downtown, with enough grade crossings that people within earshot must be used to the noise. Unless they had a hypervigilance problem, of course.

The crowd was full of officers in plainclothes. SWAT waited in a collection of unmarked vans along the route. The team was a button-push away. Brady wished Reyes hadn't declared radio earphones would attract too much notice. He would have liked a little chatter.

Brady jerked his head toward the street corner, and he and Chaz moved out of the lot to the edge of the spectators.

"Reyes thinks we can take him alive," Chaz murmured.

"Reyes thinks we can take all of them alive." The possibilities sat churning in his stomach. If Schumacher could hold it together against the monster in him, they could save his life. If Schumacher could hold it together, what made him so special? Why should he live, and not--

"The others," Chaz said, and for a moment it seemed as if he was finishing Brady's thought. "So many of them are obsessed, insane--monsters. But Schumacher... He made mistakes. He tried to atone."

"He killed four people."

"But he started out--" Chaz pushed a breath out hard. Brady turned to look.

Chaz frowned out over the heads of the spectators. His lips were pinched closed between his teeth.

"Don't borrow trouble," Brady said.

"What if that's how it happens? What if one day I'm not Good Guy Chaz, I'm Dark Chaz, and it's too late to do anything about it?"

"You read too many comic books. Have I mentioned that?"

It surprised a laugh out of Chaz. He focused on the crowd, turned away to survey the length of the street toward the end of the parade route.

"Brady," he said, breathless.

The photo projected on the wall behind them was the one Lau had found: the Acosta family arrayed before an empty fountain. Brady's heart sped up. "Somebody else might--"

The next photo looked like one from a company newsletter. Arthur Gilden, heavier than when he and Chaz had visited him. He was smiling at the camera, holding out a plaque, and shaking the hand of the man beside him. Who was also heavier than the last time they'd seen him.

Brady was sure it was Dave Schumacher, even though there was a burned-edge hole where his face belonged.

"Pictures of the dead," Chaz whispered.

Brady was already jabbing the speed-dial alert on his phone.

*

"Gilden's not picking up," Lau said. "Not at home, not on his cell."

Gamblers have iron nerves, Reyes thought. Did they get dizzy when they called and came up short? "He blames Gilden. For the bribes, for his failure to fulfill his vow." Of course he did. Reyes had thought Schumacher burned Gilden developments because he identified them as his. God damn him for an idiot with tunnel vision.

Falkner hunched over her phone, saying, "...Arthur Gilden's house to check, and report back."

Reyes heard drums behind him: not the rudimental drumming of a marching band, but an ocean-thunder, a sound like galloping, a raging dance, the roar of burning.

The parade rounded the corner.

Two kettle drums on wheels, an oversize primitive bass drum, and a dozen hand drums. A screeching wall of single-note horns, like berserkers shrieking in battle. Human voices chanting, climbing the scale and falling again.

A skeleton puppet, fifteen feet tall--two people in black held it up, two more walked on either side and waved its arms with the poles they carried. Two more puppets behind, nearly as large: a skeleton bride and groom, and the puppeteers made them circle together in a parody of waltzing.

Costumed marchers, homemade finery. Some pushed strollers with costumed children. Half a dozen absurd mutated bicycles, their riders in animal masks. A dozen people painted with iridescent fish scales pulled a platform where a

skeleton-Neptune sat enthroned, surrounded by painted cardboard sea creatures, Xs for eyes.

The parade filled the street from edge to edge, on its way to the paved lot with its raised stage and towers where the finale would take place. Anarchy, chaos, a celebration of life-in-the-face-of-death.

Falkner looked up from her phone. "Gilden's house is unlocked and empty," she shouted.

"Tell me Gilden is not his substitute offering," Brady yelled over Reyes's shoulder. Reyes turned to find Brady alert, head swiveling, and Chaz nervous behind him.

At the corner of Reyes's eye, something moved. Faster than the parade.

Against motion and darkness, the blocky figure on the bicycle was almost invisible. Black coattails flapped. A point of orange light glowed, flared, became two flames. One arced spinning and spitting into the air.

Two voices shouted. Brady filled his vision. He pushed Reyes back, against Falkner. Where was Lau? Where was Chaz? Reyes felt the crowd around him bend, break, swirl unfocused like blown leaves.

"God *damn*," Brady panted above him.

Past Brady's outstretched arm, Reyes saw a plainclothes cop push up off the pavement, slapping a smoldering spot on his jacket. Underneath him, green smoke still leaked from a black sphere, a fireworks version of a cartoon cannonball bomb.

Further down the street, the bicycle lay on its side. Its rider hung by his armpits between two more cops. His eyes and mouth gaped with shock turning to fear. Blue-streaked hair fell over his flushed face, still soft with puppy fat. Reyes guessed his age at seventeen.

He would not shake. He would not hyperventilate or stagger, dizzy with adrenaline. Brady still gripped his left biceps, which made it possible to keep those resolutions.

Nothing had changed. A gamma's fuse was still burning down.

Think, Stephen. Schumacher wanted to die. He hadn't wanted to kill. But the anomaly seemed to thrive on suffering and destruction. Schumacher had

vented his anger and his urge to harm on property, not people. Until the Acostas. What if he'd tasted death and found it irresistable?

Someone grabbed his other arm: Carraldo, dark eyes fierce, her jacket too short to completely hide her holster. "Nobody's spotted him. If he's got Gilden with him, he can't be lurking on the goddamn street."

"You talked to the pyrotechnics crew?" He was still short of breath.

"Yeah. They only had a couple effects that were radio-controlled, and they yanked those. They were pretty damned pissed off about it."

Schumacher would have been here. He would have wanted to see the photos. And after that...

Falkner's eyes were on Reyes. "He doesn't profile like a mass murderer."

And after that he'd stick to his pattern. "Lieutenant, the downtown block that Gilden Properties bought and bulldozed. Where is it?"

Carraldo jerked her thumb. "Four blocks north and west."

"Get SWAT deployed. He's there."

*

The block was parted from the rest of downtown by the train tracks. It was scraped bare, like the housing developments. A chain-link fence wrapped around it, one panel ajar, and a site office trailer anchored a corner, its windows dark, its door gaping open above a short flight of metal steps. Tucson PD's spotlights augmented the street lighting and made the space seem depthless and unreal.

"He's in there?" Brady said, peering over the roof of the squad car. It could be homeless guys or crackheads or no one at all, but even as he asked, he knew it wasn't.

"SWAT says two people. Hell of a coincidence if it's not." Carraldo had broken out her ballistic vest. Brady's own chest shouted FBI. He felt like Spam in a Kevlar can. There was no sign that Schumacher had a gun.

"No shot yet?"

"Not 'til we can I.D. somebody."

"And not then," Reyes said sharply behind them. "We can talk him out."

The bits of gray in Reyes's hair caught the light. Between that and the letters on his vest it was mostly dark face, dark shirt, dark nylon.

"He's taken a hostage," Brady said. "This is escalation." He knew Reyes would hear in the way he said it: *If he was fighting it, he's stopped.*

"Gilden's still alive."

There were plenty of possible reasons why. Most of them were bad.

"Sharpshooters'll hold," Carraldo said with a shrug. "Just not forever."

This wasn't an undercover op anymore; they were all on radio. Brady tapped his own ear, and Reyes groped for his dangling earpiece and settled it in.

Falkner joined them, another dark shape. "You're going in?"

Reyes grunted.

"Can I talk you out of this?"

Falkner could ask things like that, and Reyes would give her a considered answer.

"Every minute is making it harder for him."

Carraldo's dark brows pulled down. Maybe she heard the echoes of what they weren't saying.

Falkner stared narrow-eyed across the bare ground to the trailer. "The fence limits your options. Watch your line of retreat."

No one ever said, "Be careful." No point.

Reyes passed through the gap in the fence, hands shoulder high, steps slow and even.

The threat was in the trailer. But Brady couldn't keep from scanning the facades around them: the roof of a warehouse, the high windows of a garage, a stuccoed office building like a monster dozen-eyed toad. There was nothing to guard Reyes's back from. Why couldn't he stop trying?

Halfway to the trailer, exposed in the empty space, Reyes stopped. The spotlights cast his shadow in spokes at his feet.

"David Schumacher. I'm Special Agent Stephen Reyes of the FBI." It wasn't shouting; it was stage-voice, what an actor would use for Shakespeare's Hal

urging on his troops. It made the words sound sturdy enough to hang your coat on. "I know what happened to you, Mr. Schumacher."

A waiting silence. Schumacher was in there thinking, *He can't possibly know.*

"You never meant to hurt anyone. You did everything you could to avoid it. You're not a murderer, Mr. Schumacher." As Reyes spoke, he shifted his weight, compensated. Each time he was a half-step closer to the trailer.

Inside it, a thump; off to his left Brady saw a police rifle barrel shift, seeking.

"Their blood is on my hands." Schumacher was hoarse, his voice high with tension.

"That was an accident. You've done nothing that can't be forgiven."

Schumacher didn't reply.

"Is Arthur Gilden with you?" Reyes called.

Beat. Beat.

"Yes."

Brady let out the breath he'd been holding. Not dead in a ditch, or hidden somewhere they might not find him until too late.

"Is he all right?" Reyes asked it like a doctor on rounds, routine.

"Yes."

"Good. Why don't you send him out, Mr. Schumacher? Let him go, and I promise no one will hurt you."

"It's too late."

"It's not, Mr. Schumacher. You've been strong. You could have done terrible things. You must have been tempted. But you stayed your hand. You showed mercy. You deserve mercy."

Brady heard thumping, scuffling, from inside the trailer. Suddenly, in the dark gap of the door, a figure showed. When it pushed forward, the light fell on it.

It was Gilden. All that was visible of Schumacher behind Gilden's bulk was the forearm around Gilden's throat. Gilden's arms were pinned to his sides by the duct tape wound around his chest and belly, over his white polo shirt.

The same tape strapped a bundle to Gilden's body, a squarish, irregular lump sprouting loops of wire.

"Bomb squad," Brady snapped into his mic. "Talk to me."

"Please," Gilden said, barely audible.

"I repent my sins." Schumacher's voice trembled and scratched.

"If that's C4, we're fucked," said a stranger's voice in Brady's ear. "It's enough to take out us and some of the building next door."

"Reyes, you get that?"

"You won't hurt Gilden, Dave." Brady knew Reyes was talking to him as much as to Schumacher. "God judges, not us. You know that. Gilden deserves a chance to make up for what he's done. So do you. Let Gilden go, Dave. Let us help you."

"Hail, Mary, full of grace," said Schumacher, and his voice grew steady. "The Lord is with thee."

No, no, no.

"Shit," Carraldo whispered.

"Somebody tell me you've got the shot," Brady begged his microphone.

Falkner started for the fence. "Stephen--"

"Dave, you made a vow." Reyes's voice was a whip-crack. "This won't fulfill it." He stepped toward the trailer.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now--"

Gilden seemed to lunge forward. At the grade crossing down the street, the train horn bellowed, bellowed as Gilden fell, open-mouthed, down the steps. The horn filled Brady's head, but he could still hear the shot.

In the trailer doorway, Schumacher swayed.

Reyes took three quick steps toward the trailer, but Falkner was running flat out across the dirt, coat flying. She brought him down hard, and there was no

way to tell if he'd been making for Gilden or for Schumacher.

Schumacher fell backward into the darkness.

Brady got through the fence gap ahead of the bomb squad because he had to. Falkner turned the white oval of her face up to him as he passed, yelled, "Go! Go!" as if he needed that. He took the stairs in a pair of leaps, pistol already in his hand, and found himself standing over Schumacher with the view of his face interrupted by the front sight.

SWAT had got the head shot. But that was why Brady was there first. He held on the target until the paramedics got to the door. Then he said, "Stay out of my line of fire," and continued to hold.

He followed, pistol out, finger registered on the barrel, when they carried Schumacher down the stairs strapped to the stretcher. Years ago Worth had put a man in an ambulance and seen him come back to life. She hadn't had anyone nearby ready with a gun.

"Brady," Falkner said. She waited at the bottom of the stairs. "Stand down."

He blinked. Falkner jerked her head toward Gilden.

He lay sobbing on the ground as the bomb squad cut him out of the duct tape. An officer stood beside him in protective gear, his face shield flipped up. He held the package that had been taped to Gilden's chest.

"Fake," he said, thin and shaky. "It's clay."

*

Reyes sat in an examining room at Tucson Medical Center, because it was a private place to wait. He was good at waiting, usually. Now it was almost more than he could manage to stay in the molded plastic chair, his elbows on his knees, massaging his hands until they ached.

He jerked upright when the door latch scraped. Falkner came in.

She began with a deep inhalation, and Reyes knew he wouldn't like what followed. "The doctors explained to Ms. Schumacher that he might recover...some brain function."

"Is he breathing unassisted?"

Falkner's jaw worked. "She told them to take him off the ventilator. He's gone."

Reyes heard a muffled boom. His hand slamming the counter, he realized.

"What could you have done?" Falkner's voice grated, tired and angry. "You couldn't tell her he was likely to make a miraculous recovery. Even if you could, what would he have been if it happened?" She blew through her lips. "We couldn't save him, Stephen."

"He lost his faith."

"What?"

"I thought he was a good Catholic. But when redemption wasn't abstract anymore... He couldn't believe it applied to him."

"Doomed by his own mythology," Falkner said.

"You'd think, of all people, I'd take that into account."

She made a noise that might pass for a laugh. "I guess you're not as special as you think."

He raised his head. The lines around her eyes and mouth were scribed deep with weariness. "Is that Esther Falkner for, 'It's not all about you, Reyes?'"

"It is today, at least." She wiped her hands up her face and into her hair. "Let's go home."

*

The cabin was full of diffuse morning light, kind on the eyes. Brady rubbed his anyway. He'd stretched out on the hotel bed, but he didn't think he'd actually slept.

Based on appearances, no one else had either. Usually nobody slept on the flight out, and everybody slept on the flight back. But Lau had a paperback open on her lap, and she stared blankly at it, nibbling on a cuticle. Chaz took things out of his backpack, arranged them in heaps by some system only he knew, then put them back. Reyes had the Tucson papers, but he didn't spend long on any section. Falkner sat, hands in her lap, and frowned out the window.

Reyes folded his latest attempt closed with a snap. The real estate section, Brady noticed. Reyes ought to have known better.

"Seniors' communities," he said, as if the words were sour. "Why the hell would anyone want to spend his declining years surrounded by old people?"

"All right," Brady replied. "How *do* you want to spend your declining years? Assuming these aren't them."

Reyes stared at him under half-lowered lids. Brady almost thought he wouldn't answer. "Sailboat in the Caribbean."

"Can you sail?"

"I'll figure it out."

Lau laughed as only someone who actually knew how to sail would laugh at that.

"And you?" Reyes raised his eyebrows at her.

She blinked, frowned, pursed her lips. "I'm going to be the old bat at the end of the block with thirty cats, who runs out on the porch in her slippers screaming, 'You goddamn kids get off my lawn!'"

"You'll be terrific at it," Brady told her.

"You damn betcha. How about you?"

He wasn't ready for that. What *did* he expect out of old age? Getting old, mostly. *Ten-seven,* he thought. *Out of service. Off duty.* He'd be off duty someday, wouldn't he? "I'll work 'til they kick me out of the Bureau. Then I'm getting a part-time job as a shopping mall Santa Claus."

"In cowboy boots," said Falkner drily. "Me, I think I'll be a grandmother. Eventually."

Lau grinned. "Better remind the kids there's no rush."

Across the aisle, Chaz bent his head over his open backpack, still rummaging, wearing a small closed-lipped smile and worried eyebrows. So he could pretend he hadn't listened.

Brady's gut clenched. *Intelligent design. My ass.*

Brady rose, stalked to the end of the cabin where he'd stuffed his go bag, dug in the bottom for the deck of cards. Then he walked back and waved it under Chaz's nose. "Gin," he said.

Chaz looked up, eyebrows climbing his forehead. At last he said, "Loser buys sushi."

"Oh, come on."

"Okay, loser buys teppanyaki. It's your bankruptcy."

Brady unfolded the table and sat down across from him.

*

Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is, in its deepest being, something helpless that wants help from us.

--Rainer Maria Rilke

*

"Skullcrusher Mountain" © Jonathan Coulton. Lyrics used by permission. Visit jonathancoulton.com for complete lyrics and more music.

Plunger

Silver Spring, MD, December 2007

Falkner lay back in the tub, supporting her head on crossed arms. The strands of her hair trailed through her fingers, twining like pond-weed in water near painfully hot. She breathed deep, letting the scents of peppermint and lavender clear her head, and relaxed her neck and into the water. She had to prop her feet on the wall above the faucet to stretch her spine. They never made these damned things long enough.

The heat soaked into her back, and she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, letting herself float lightly, hoping she might relax the muscles enough to hear the soft crackle of her spine unkinking. She had prescription relaxants, but she hated to take them. They didn't help her think.

Ben was taking the girls to his mom's place, and she had the entire house to herself for forty-five blessed minutes.

She was still luxuriating in the idea when something startled her awake and upright, out of the cooling tub, reaching for the nearest weapon. She paused with one foot out of the tub to assess the situation, breathing deeply, and met Ben's surprised face as he peered around the bathroom door. "Yipe," he said.

"Dammit, Ben, you startled me into next week!"

"Sorry. I was afraid you'd slipped under." Tentatively, he lifted his left hand, revealing a greasy brown paper sack in a white plastic carrier bag. "I have chicken pad thai and a bottle of Chardonnay. Will that make up for frightening you half to death?"

She was shivering, and whatever good the bath had done her back had been undone by the cold and the adrenaline. She wrapped her free hand across her chest. Because her voice hadn't stopped feeling shaky, she nodded.

He grinned. "Tell you what. Why don't you draw another bath and take the chill off? Your goose pimples are blue. I'll warm your robe up in the dryer. And then we can have dinner in bed."

She blushed, pretty sure he could see it go down to her toes. "I might let you live," she allowed.

He winked. "Just promise me before you come eat, you'll put the plunger down. And wash your hands."

He had closed the door and vanished before she realized what she had in her hand, upraised and wound way back for a swing. Gently, she set the plunger down. And then, leaning against the wall beside the tub, she started to laugh.

Chaz Villete's LiveJournal, Nov. 11th, 2007 – Nov. 14th, 2007

coyote in a sheepdog suit

Hey, 0metotchtli!

- Nov. 11th, 2007 at 10:23 AM

You're in a webcomic!

- Current Mood: on springs
- Current Music: Sugar - If I Can't Change Your Mind

[triple super secret flock filter] Okay, god is an iron.

- Nov. 11th, 2007 at 12:38 PM

Holy cow, Batfriends. Remember this conversation? As of, oh, yesterday?

Would you believe I think I just Met A Girl? I mean, not like seriously Met A Girl.

But I have a *date.* At least, I think it's a date. I'm pretty sure it's a date.

Tonight.

Pre-emptively, before the ~~seagulls~~ my friends descend, her name is Amarilis, she works for the W.H.O., she's another regular at the Puerto Rican place on the corner, and she's maybe 28, 29? I've seen here there before.

I went down to pick up my takeout order and she broke a heel coming out as I was going in (I was holding the door) and I kind of, er, caught her before she could faceplant on the sidewalk. (The *sopa de huevo y limón* was not so lucky.)

Anyway, she bought me coffee. And before I was really sure what was going on, there were dinner-and-a-movie plans. *Nightmare Before Christmas*. In 3D.

...*her choice*.

Oh, gawd, this only happens in Meg Ryan movies, doesn't it? I mean seriously, with the meet cute and the common interests and the whole thing?

....OMG, somebody come fix my hair and dress me!!!!!!

dies
spazzes
dies

- Current Mood: intimidated
- Current Music: Tom Waits - I Know I Been Changed

[sooper secret filter] I'm not Scarlett O'Hara.

- Nov. 11th, 2007 at 9:04 PM

Okay, so that thing girls do, where they go on a date and they eat the salad and sip unsweetened iced tea and look miserable?

Yeah, well. That's me in drag.

I ate everything in the house before I went out to meet Amarilis. I figure I'll break her in slowly. If I get the opportunity. (It'll never last, right?)

Assuming the second date doesn't go too badly (It was definitely a date. And no, I'm not telling you how I know.) I will start plotting ways to introduce her to you guys. Or maybe not.

You know something? DEFINITELY not.

Is it really lying if you just ease up on a problematic topic? Like, oh, I have this weird metabolism thing and need to eat constantly to stay alive? And yeah, you get used to being stared at in restaurants, sorry, after a while it gets to be a game.

We did the totally neutral first-date thing and met at the restaurant, which was a nice low-key Eritrean place complete with the basket tables. I have a theory: Eritrean is good for first dates, because there are no table manners to mind, except remembering not to use your left hand. (And yeah, I did think about Dice, Daph. Ick.) We got one of the combination platters for two, and I think she was shocked that I ate the salad. (Boys don't eat salad. I hear it rumored.)

There was popcorn at the movie, and I even made sure she got some of it.

Annnnd.... I have no idea how to blog this, but... a pretty girl kissed me!

(We split up at the Metro station. She kissed me in front of *people*, even.)
(We're going dancing on Tuesday.)
(Woot!)

- Current Location: a pretty girl kissed me
- Current Mood: hopeful
- Current Music: Feist - My Moon My Man

November 12th, 2007

coyote in a sheepdog suit

Be nice, wouldn't it?

- Nov. 12th, 2007 at 4:30 PM

"It would be worth while, once for all, fairly and cleanly to tell how we are to be used, as vendors of Lucifer matches send directions in the envelope, both how light may be readily procured and no accident happen to the user."

--Henry David Thoreau, obviously, from the link.

It was cold and rainish, and I slept and read magazines and ate takeout all day.

- Current Mood: thinky
- Current Music: Imogen Heap - Glittering Cloud

November 14th, 2007

ahem.

Nov. 14th, 2007 at 12:57 PM

trollcatz, climbing tonight? Also, if **0metotchtli** is game, movie night Friday?

And to answer the question on everyone's lips, yes, assuming I'm in Virginia, Amarilis and I are going out again on Saturday.

Don't wait up.

This is how it works
You're young until you're not
You love until you don't
You try until you can't.

You laugh until you cry
You cry until you laugh
And everyone must breathe
Until their dying breath.

- Current Mood: bouncy
- Current Music: Ani DiFranco - Studying Stones

Nov. 14th, 2007

6:05 PM

I'm feeling kind of bored with the whole food tracking thing.

Do we think I can stop?

Or do I need it to keep me honest?

- Current Mood: contemplative
- Current Music: Seu Jorge - Rebel Rebel

shadow unit

1.07 "Overkill" - by Elizabeth Bear

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

Act I

Somewhere in Arlington, VA, the Friday after Thanksgiving, 2007, 3:00 AM EST

It always started with the phone.

Tonight, that was the only familiar thing, because when Chaz Villette woke groaning to its warble the first thing he remembered was that he wasn't in his own bed. The second thing he remembered was to try not to disturb the warm, heavy weight pillowed on his numb left arm as he fumbled for the night stand with his right. Her hair was in his mouth, her breath warm against his neck as he opened the phone without bothering to squint at the name on the display. He whispered, "Villette."

"I'm sorry to ruin your holiday," Falkner said in his ear.

"Mmmph." On his shoulder, Amarilis made a noise of protest and burrowed. He twisted his left hand up awkwardly to stroke her hair in apology. And that, right there--girl in his arms, the need to apologize--was a reason for thankfulness. "No, s'okay. On my way. Office?"

"Airport," she said. "We're going to San Diego."

"Right," he answered. "Thanks." He closed the phone, and set it down as quietly as he could. "Amarilis?"

"Work?" she said, with more resignation than rancor. She kissed the pulse point where his neck ran into his collarbone.

Chaz's visual and spatial memory was good--bordering on the mythical photographic memory--but outside of spy movies, an *eidetic* memory is not a *perfect* memory. And in the dim green light of the alarm clock, sight was the sense that least concerned him. So for a stolen second, he closed his eyes and drank in the warmth of coarse hair and silken skin, the smell of the girl, her

faint musical lilt you couldn't even call an accent. Categorizing, imprinting, making it true for later.

Please, please don't fuck this up. Then he let out his inheld breath, folded the moment away, and wiggled out from under her. "Don't get up." He swung his feet into the cold air. "I'll call you when I get to San Diego, okay?"

"K," she mumbled, voice still blurred with sleep. "Careful."

"I'll come back," he promised, and had to touch her hair one more time before he could make himself leave her bed.

*

*

San Diego International Airport (Lindbergh Field), San Diego, CA, Friday, November 23, 2007, 5:00 AM PST

Nikki Lau met the bulk of her arriving team at the airport, because it seemed like the least she could do for them at 5 am Pacific Time on Black Friday. Lau's credentials won her and her sidearm past Homeland Security. The Gulfstream was too small for a jetway, so she was standing inside the cold glass as Esther Falkner, Chaz Villette, and Daphne Worth humped their go bags sleepily across the tarmac. Brady had arrived from Texas on a commercial flight hours before, and neither Todd nor Reyes was due until midmorning.

Chaz huddled in his coat and stretched-out sweater, but Falkner was apparently impervious to the chill. The paper tray of coffee in Lau's hands warmed her fingers. When the team came up the ramp and through the fire door and saw the cups, Lau honestly thought Chaz might hug her.

"You are a ministering angel," he said, as she handed him the one marked extra cream, no sugar. Falkner drank hers black. It was the hottest cup, though Lau had been holding them for ten minutes now. The skim milk and Splenda was for Daphne, who took in Lau's outfit with raised eyebrows.

"Sun dress in November?"

Lau pushed at the sleeves of the leather bomber jacket she'd thrown on over the dress to stay warm. It dated from her undergrad days, the leather cracked at the joints and creaking, the map-printed lining tattered against her skin.

She'd retrieved it from her parents' house. "I was going to Baja to dive," she said. "For the holiday weekend. I got intercepted."

Daphne put a hand on her forearm briefly. "It looks like a bad one."

Lau's team all were hollow-eyed, and Lau suspected that the contents of the file folders tucked under arms and wedged into the web pockets on their travel bags had a great deal to do with that. She knew what was in those folders. She'd seen it all first. It was why she'd sent for them, when she was just supposed to be home for the holiday.

It had kept her up all night, too. "Do you want to stop at the hotel?" Lau asked Falkner, knowing already what the answer would be.

"No," Falkner said. "If the scene is secured, I want to get a look."

Lau smiled. A tight grimace, of professionalism rather than pleasure. "They're waiting for us. I'll have Brady meet us there. He'll want to get a look before we all descend on it, anyway. Our contact is Detective Maria Gometz. Her parents and mine are neighbors, which is how I heard about the case. I've known her since grade school."

"Of course you have," Falkner murmured. She swung toward the semi-vacant corridor, her black coat flaring like a raven's wings. The rest of the team fell in behind like sleepy ducklings.

*

Because San Diego was the next thing to her home town, Lau drove. It was still too early for heavy traffic, so they reached the scene in under forty-five minutes. Lau parked the SUV at the curb in predawn darkness, then fiddled with the keys to give her passengers a moment to orient themselves.

Party lights scrolled lazily the length of the street--police only, at this point. The paramedics and ambulances had withdrawn. Most of the neighbors had gone back inside to get ready for work or school; only a few, immune to boredom, lingered on the sidewalks waiting for the bodies to be carried out.

There were still three satellite trucks parked beyond the Maginot line of the official vehicles and Lau heard a chopper circling overhead. It wasn't hard to pick out the reporters, lined up out of each other's camera angles, two conversing with their camera operators and the third finishing up a top-of-the-hour live spot. The team would walk right through her shot, and Lau

nudged Falkner to make sure Falkner knew it. The 6 am news and traffic report had just gotten a little more interesting.

Falkner, following the line of her gaze out the windshield, nodded. "Do you know any of them?"

"All," Lau answered. "I grew up in L.A., remember? Practically a home-town girl, and I majored in Communications at UCLA with the one on the left. It won't be a problem."

As they appraised a beige two-story stucco home at the center of the lines of yellow tape, Lau pictured a moth in a spiderweb. But the tape-spinners weren't the predators here.

The house was new development from red tile roof to a ground-floor facade consisting mostly of a two-car garage and a large bay window. A block wall isolated the back yard, but the foundation plantings had not been established. One lonely Queen Anne palm sulked in the front yard. Somebody had made a preliminary attempt at a garden, within contracted limits. Not that it mattered: the spattery footprints oxidizing on the brightly-lit front stoop would never have met with a neighborhood association's approval.

"Gah," Daphne said. "If you're paying a half-mil for a house in San Diego, why do you want to buy something like *that*?"

"Brady says it used to be nice inside," Lau said, and the four of them popped the doors. Falkner took point, Chaz right behind her, Daphne and Lau flanking. Reyes was always on them to think about the cinematography.

Brady played the game too, waiting impassively beside a bomb squad van. His feet were shoulder-width apart, arms folded as if parade rest had gotten crosswired with a State Trooper saunter. The woman beside him was a light-skinned Latina, the corners of her eyes already showing traces of a cop squint. "That's Maria," Lau said. "My classmate. Gometz is actually a Swedish name, but her mother was Mexican. She's fluently bilingual."

"Detective at 29?" Chaz said. "Not bad."

"Invincible woman," Lau answered.

He smiled out of the corner of his mouth. As he leaned down to her ear, she caught a trace of feminine perfume in his hair. *Ah, so.* He said, "Takes one to know one."

She grinned at him, wondering if he would know that she approved of him dating people who were not Nikki Lau. She didn't have time for a snappy comeback before they reached Maria and Brady.

As they drew up, Maria's shoulders lowered. A deep, relieved breath filled her. "Thank you."

Lau introduced the team while Maria shook each hand. She nodded over her shoulder and said, "And of course I've already met S.S.A. Brady."

"We've done a prelim," Brady said. "But that's all. Detective Gometz, you don't have to stay. I know you haven't slept since yesterday, and you took me through already."

"It's not a problem," Maria said, but Lau caught her eyes and gave a tiny headshake, and Maria pulled her shoulders back.

Lau said. "We'll work better if nobody's hovering. Go grab a nap. We'll meet back at the station."

"Go file paperwork is more like it," Maria said, but she managed a smile as she withdrew.

"Thank you," Falkner said in Lau's ear, when Maria was gone.

"No problem."

Brady turned to fall in on Falkner's left. Worth dropped back to make room. He spoke while they walked, low and even, his voice pitched so all four of the others could hear. "Tactical and the bomb squad have cleared the house while leaving the scene as intact as possible. Forensics is waiting on us. Because of the potential danger, they're asking us not to touch or move anything."

"Potential danger?"

"Yeah," Brady said. "You know the son of a bitch redecorated--"

"We saw the photos." Chaz rubbed his eyes left-handed. "He staged the scene."

"They don't do it justice." Brady's shoulders jerked convulsively, as if he caught them just as they were about to rise up around his ears and forced them down again. All three media crews were now filming. Within the hour

the whole city would know the FBI was taking an interest. "He boobytrapped it, like the first scene. We have one officer at the hospital being treated for a needle stick, and the bomb squad found several small explosive devices. There was a Supersoaker rigged up to shoot acid in the face of anybody who opened the master bedroom door. He blinded an officer at the first scene, but they were ready for him this time."

"Jesus fuck," Chaz said. "Two levels of aggression. You think it's a team?"

Brady shrugged. "One gunning for the families, one for the first responders? Fucked up, if it is. All the booby traps are designed to maim, not kill, unless you got really unlucky. Dried peas for shrapnel. He left dirty needles all over the place: the whole house is like a fucking Snopes dot com rebuttal. We can't go in the front."

Suiting action to words, Brady led them around through an access gate into the back yard. The kitchen door stood open.

"Block wall for privacy," Chaz said, disapproving. "Does a great job of ensuring just that for a home invader, doesn't it?"

"Not sure yet how he entered, but this is how he left the scene," Brady said. "Exit upstage, through the backdrop. No footprints in the yard."

"Xeriscaped." Chaz scuffed small white stones. "New development, low water use yard. He wouldn't leave much trace."

"He doesn't," Brady said.

They donned nitrile gloves and blue booties and stepped in past the officer on watch. In contravention of his usual custom, Brady went first, Falkner immediately behind. Lau made sure she was the last one through the door.

Lau heard Daphne's deep breath. It was cold in the house with the door standing open, but the filed-iron-and-sugar stench of blood still filled the place, underlying a sewer smell Lau knew from unfortunate experience as spilled intestines.

Chaz made one of his self-effacing fade-backs, but said, "If he left through the back, why are there bloody footprints on the front stoop and none out this way?"

Brady grimaced. "You'll see."

The kitchen was bad. Lau said, "I pity the crime scene techs."

The double sink lay full of soapy scarlet water and greasy Thanksgiving dishes, knife handles protruding. Apparently the family had not finished scrubbing the roasting pans before retiring to bed, though it looked as though the dishwasher had been loaded. A parasitic tangle of extension cords ran from a pair of power strips sitting in the middle of the floor. Between the power strips and each cord was a nondescript pyramid-shaped white plastic box with a grille in the front. A boom box, plugged into a timer plugged directly into the wall, had been set alongside the power strips.

"What on Earth is *that*?" Worth stepped forward to get a better look. She leaned down with her hands held awkwardly to the sides, trying to examine it closely without touching.

"The Clapper," Chaz grated.

Brady had a gift for seeming cool and professional under any circumstance, but Lau noticed that his hands were in his pockets. "He had the CD player on a timer. The timer goes off, the music comes on, and every light in the house starts flashing on and off like a disco. Gaffer and lighting designer, all rolled into one sick son of a bitch."

"Somebody on the street was bound to notice." Falkner stood in the center of the room, hands by her sides, turning very slowly. "So he could control when the scene was discovered."

"We've got to assume he's monitoring police band radio," Brady said. "Come on, there's worse. You want to be ready for the dining room."

It was a useless caution. Nothing could have prepared Lau for the dining room.

The table was set for a feast, but the carcass at its centerpiece had been the family dog, and the relish dish was not full of olives. The family members propped up around the table were handcuffed and then *nailed* to their carved wooden chairs, eye sockets gaping, jaws lolling open on tongueless mouths. Body cavities lay hollow and shining, internal organs conspicuous by their absence.

Brady was not looking at the staging. He'd seen it already, and was watching the team for reactions, as if by filtering their perceptions he could get a

second chance at a first impression.

If the smell had been strong in the kitchen, this room reeked. Lau breathed shallowly, wishing for one selfish moment that Reyes and Brady weren't so insistent that all the senses--including smell--were important on a scene.

"Oh, god." She wished she could at least allow herself to close her eyes for a moment, or turn her face away. No one on the team would think less of her, not when--cold as it was--she could see the thin sheen of sweat sticking Chaz's uncombed curls to his forehead from here. But *she* would know. "That's--"

"Ridiculous," Chaz finished, his voice thin and brittle as fatigued metal. "It's so horrible it's silly. Thanksgiving in Hell."

"Overkill," Falkner said.

"His Fourth Of July picnic was kind of spectacular, too," Brady said. "You got the photos?"

Jaw working, Daphne nodded.

Falkner stepped forward, stern handsome face as impassive as if she were observing an autopsy. "Do we have an order of death?"

"Waiting on the coroner," Brady said. "Preliminary analysis suggests the injuries were inflicted perimortem. Cause of death probably the disembowelment, but that's conjecture at this point."

"And the rest of the remains?"

"Some are in the sink," Brady said. "Some are draped around the living room. He left the front door unlocked. The first responder to walk in fell over a pile of intestines."

"The footprints," Lau said. From the expression on Chaz's face, he'd figured it out a second before she did.

"Kidneys are in the bathrooms, appropriately enough. He tucked the hearts into bed," Brady said. "And wait until you see what he did with the banister."

"Where are the *other* footprints?" Falkner's gloved fingers clenched. "His footprints? He must have been saturated in blood. How did he move through

the rooms to do that and not leave a trail? How did he exit the back door? How did he get home, covered in the blood of five victims?"

"And the dog," Lau said, in a small voice. If she looked at the dog, she wasn't looking at the children. "So you see why I was pretty sure this was ours?"

If this were a movie, this would be the moment when somebody would crack a steely-eyed joke--*and I thought my family hated the holidays*. But it wasn't that kind of film, and so they each moved white-lipped through the house, in unison but isolated, tracing the steps of the killer--host, or alpha--who had been here before them.

"This is only his second attack?" Worth said, finally, when they had examined the living room, half-bath, garage, and den, and moved on to the upstairs. Bedrooms opened off a long hallway, two on each side, the master bedroom at the back.

"It's a pretty dramatic signature," Lau said. "San Diego PD might have missed one. But I think it's unlikely."

"A holiday killer," Brady said. "What's a fucking escalation going to look like?"

Falkner nodded. "I hope he's Christian. Chanukah is early this year."

"Huh," said Chaz. "Why do you suppose he skipped Halloween?"

*

Distance yourself, Chaz thought. Sometimes, the worse it was, the faster you could get the professional dissociation kicked in. *Make it a comic book.*

It could have been. *Hellblazer. Miracle Man.* Too much for a movie. Even a slasher flick wouldn't show this. Organ meat already dulling, darkening, crusting like steak left on the counter.

Comic books didn't come with the smell, the rust-brown sticky smears and spatters. There was blood, plenty of blood, dripped and splashed, elongated spatters up the stair runner showing him where somebody had made four or five trips carrying dripping bundles. Blood crushed like dried paint in the carpet underfoot, the rug too saturated for Chaz to avoid stepping on evidence. But no shoe prints, no hand prints. No brush-marks from saturated

clothing or hair contacting furniture or walls. As if even this carnage could not bloody the hand that wreaked it.

He wasn't the only one thinking so. Brady--incongruous in his blue booties and matching nitrile gloves--caught his eye across the landing and said, white-faced, "Lady Macbeth would love this shit."

Chaz swallowed a mouthful of extra-fluid saliva so he wouldn't drool like a terrified dog. He needed to lift himself out of the reality of death and horror and people who had suffered and died in hideous, pathetic ways. There was another place, an abstract space where this was a puzzle, a complicated game, and he could put himself there, operate on that level, and get through. The blood couldn't stain him either. As long as he maintained that fiction, he could operate.

If he could just get there. *Visualize a stair*, he thought, *and climb it*. Climb it out of the blood. *Dissociate. It's there for a reason.*

If he stopped feeling the pain, would he start to crave it?

He thought Brady was taking it harder, though, and as the big blond cowboy paused in the doorway of the last bedroom--the little girl's room--and rubbed the bristles on the nape of his neck, Chaz stopped beside him. "You look like you've got something."

Brady was playing his own distancing game. "Thinking about the blocking," he said. "If we assume he got them after they went to bed, then before they died, he had to have come through the upstairs several times to collect the family. Dog first, or it would have made a fuss. I wonder how he got into the house: there's a security system, but it's not armed. Then Dad, because Dad is the dangerous one. Then Mom. Or did he get them both at once, make Mom handcuff Dad to the chair, restrain Mom himself?"

"That would work," Chaz said. "He had a means to control them, then. A firearm. Or a manifestation, but I'm going to take a wild guess and say his mythology is more likely related to how little impact he's left on the environment."

"Good guess."

Chaz finished, "Or he took one of the children hostage, and made Mom and Dad handcuff the others."

"Handcuffs say law enforcement groupie to me," Brady said, with a glance for confirmation. Chaz nodded unhappily.

Serial killers *liked* cops. They liked to keep tabs on the investigation, befriend officers, inject themselves into investigations. Craving authority, a significant percentage tried to *become* cops.

Serial killers weren't all gammas. But there were commonalities.

Brady was still looking sidelong at him. "What does the house tell you?"

"Happy family," Chaz said. *Not any more.* That was grief he felt, wasn't it? Revulsion, not satisfaction. "The house was reasonably clean, but not obsessively so. Lived in. The children's furnishings are adequate to their needs. Downstairs, family and individual photographs, communal space. Upstairs, privacy, Mom and Dad's shared office. Somebody picked up after the dog, but he'd chewed on the dining room table leg and it hasn't been repaired. Calendar in the kitchen with four people's handwriting on it, two adults and two juveniles." His mouth twisted. He wished he could manage, just once, to keep that expression off his face.

But Brady was still looking at him expectantly.

"Mom was pretty," Chaz said reluctantly. *Was.* Could you get to hate a conjugation? "Cheekbones, eyes. Athletic. Turn your head."

"Most women turn *your* head."

Chaz thought of Amarilis, skin the gold of polished beechwood, the dark blur of her lashes against the edge of her eyelid, the flare of her hips and the notch of her collarbone. "What do *you* get from the house?"

"Notice any commonalities with the first scene?"

"From the photos? That one wasn't new construction. This family is financially comfortable. That one was struggling. This one is American Nuclear. That one was Mexican Extended." Chaz checked his gloves for blood. Finding them clean, he folded his arms. Unwillingly, he said, "Both houses and families were well-cared for. Food in the fridge, clothes in good repair."

Go ahead, Villette. Envy the dead decent parenting. Grow the hell up. We don't take pleasure in other people's misery. Even if human beings do it often

enough that they have a word for it: *Schadenfreude.*

Human beings. Baselines. Chaz had to be better than they were, because *they* were presumed not to be monsters until proven otherwise.

Chaz swallowed bitterness and made himself continue, "Both mothers were striking. Brunettes, and late thirties to mid forties."

"Odds on, somebody has MILF issues." Brady paused. "Somebody other than you."

Chaz would have thrown something, but they were at a murder scene. But then Daphne emerged from the hall bathroom, Lau right behind her. Lau looked smooth, unflappable, her dark eyes unreadable. But the fault lines on Daphne's face were drawn deep. Chaz could imagine her at fifty. She'd age well.

"Did you see the bathtub?" Lau said.

Stained water and a rubber duckie, floating at a tilt. Tightly, Brady nodded, so Chaz didn't have to.

Falkner tromped inelastically up the stairs, one hand hovering over the blood-smeared banister as if she'd like to use it for balance, folding her phone in the other. "He brought in the timer and the Clappers. The extension cords are from the house. I've got Hafidha looking for anybody who bought sound-activated switching devices by the caseload."

"The boom box is from the boys' room." Chaz jerked his thumb down the hall. "You can see where it was sitting. Footprint in the dust. The CD is the 1812 Overture, though. I don't think that was from the kids' room."

Who was first? he wondered. Who was last? It was important: the last to die would be the gamma's primary victim, the one at whom his rage was directed. He or she would have been forced to watch his or her family tortured and killed, while the anomaly fed off all that delicious fear and pain and despair, the hopelessness and death.

If *feeding* was what it actually did.

"How the hell did he get through this house, carrying dripping organs, and not leave footprints?" Daphne glanced over her shoulder at the bathroom

again. "He spent hours here. He took his time." She winced at the cliché the moment it left her mouth.

"We'll know more when we get Dr. Frost's report," Falkner said. "For this many bodies, she's agreed to fly out. I sent the Gulfstream back for her."

Lau's mouth opened.

Falkner silenced her with a look. "She'll stay in the autopsy suite," she promised.

Chaz stepped over next to Lau. Radiant body heat was as good as a pat on the shoulder, sometimes. Lower lip compressing, Lau nodded to Falkner. She said, "Have we decided it's a host for sure?"

"Houdini clause." Falkner slid her cell into its belt case. "Come on. It's after dawn, and Reyes and Todd are en route. Let's grab some food and some sleep, regroup when they get here, and have a look at the preliminary postmortem findings once Frost has had a crack at the bodies. "

Act II

Chaz couldn't sleep, so once he called Amarilis and checked in-- "I saw you on CNN," she said. "Or the back of your head vanishing behind some crime scene tape, anyway."--he grabbed a second breakfast and headed out to pick up Todd at the airport. On Black Friday, it was the only place in San Diego more terrifying than the Horton Plaza shopping mall. Chaz stuck close to a pillar so he wouldn't be trampled.

The plane was on time, and Chaz had a bottle of water and a large coffee ready when Todd came down the jetway in the midst of a wall of holiday travelers. "Am I the last?"

"Dad got in about two hours ago." Chaz lowered his voice and said, "Baggage claim?"

"Completely awkward and unsafe--but concealable!--shoulder holster." Todd downed half the coffee in three grateful swallows. He tilted his head back to look Chaz in the eye. "Extra ammo's in my go bag. I did the TFATP thing last year so I wouldn't have to ship my weapon checked."

"TFATP?"

"Tactics for Flying Armed Training Program. Absolutely stultifying. Most wasted weekend ever. You should go. Want a sandwich?" He tucked the water bottle under his right arm and let a blue soft-sided lunch cooler slide down the left. "Sal insists on cooking a twenty-three pound turkey, even though it's just the three of us now and Dad barely eats enough to keep a bird alive."

"Sandwich?" The morning suddenly looked a little brighter. "Turkey sandwich? *Leftovers?*" Then Chaz blinked. "Since when do you refer to yourself in the third person?"

Todd, balancing the cooler between his arm and abdomen and unzipping it one-handed, looked up in surprise and laughed. "Sal. Sally. Salome. My sister. A fearsome creature: an ordained minister of the Universal Life Church and fifth-grade teacher. Who also runs the local gifted-and-talented program, can kick-start a '67 Harley-Davidson XLH Sportster, and refuses to marry on the grounds that matrimony is a tool of the patriarchy. That's her story and she's sticking to it, anyway, although I suspect her continued single state has more to do with a refusal to choose between the devoted gentleman caller she's been entertaining since 1983 and her 'best friend,' a lovely academic poet at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, who also happens to have limpid brown eyes of the first water and write lesbian erotic poetry that's been published in thirteen languages, two of them English."

Chaz took the offered sandwich--thirteen ounces--and didn't protest when Todd handed him a second one. It seemed totally improbable that Solomon Todd had not sprung full-formed from the head of Seuss (who, Chaz happened to know, had spent some time on nearby Coronado), but if he did have a sister, of course she would be named Salome. Chaz wondered if they were twins, or if the parents had just been as cutesy as they were allusive. "You're totally making at least half of that up."

Todd winked. "Believe what you like. It's the Midwest. People can fail to see just about anything if you give them half a chance to ignore it. She also makes excellent snickerdoodles, and nobody wants to get dropped from the holiday cookie list. Would you like one?"

Chaz rolled his eyes, but he nodded. He swallowed a mouthful of slightly dry turkey, tart cranberry sauce, and crumbly home-made bread to say, "Thank you. Do you need anything before we head out to the San Diego

Police Department, Northwestern Division? Wait until you see this thing: the cop shop is brand new this year, three-quarters empty, and looks more like a *space* station."

"No." Todd finished his coffee and looked around for the trash. "Now I'm good. Let's go see the elephant."

"Oh man," Chaz said. "You have *no idea*."

*

Back at the brand spanking new Northwest Division of the San Diego Police Department, Lau found a place beside Worth at a row of steel desks in a previously-vacant six-man office with attached conference room. Her first clue that the prodigals had returned was Todd's voice through the doorway. She raised her head from the files on the July murder. At the sight of the soft-sided cooler in Todd's hand, her stomach growled.

On her left, Worth said "Lunch?" hopefully, flipping an autopsy report shut left-handed.

"What's left of it." Todd winked, while Chaz guiltily dusted crumbs from the collar of his tweed jacket.

Lau smiled behind her hand; asking a beta to resist food was like leaving your dinner on the coffee table and expecting a dog to ignore it.

Todd said, "Turkey sandwiches and cookies. And I brought in some mashed potatoes and salad for you. Sorry I couldn't do better; Thanksgiving is a carnivorous affair at my dad's place. I'm going to guess a cop shop has coffee?"

Lau tipped her head at the pot. "Grab it fast. And bring the sandwiches. Reyes and Falkner wanted us in the conference room as soon as you got here."

"Where's Brady?" Todd asked, as Brady appeared around the corner brandishing a thumb drive.

"Frost's first reports," he said, and tossed the drive underhand to Worth. "There's a set still printing, but here's the files. Frost says, and I quote, that a postmortem goes much faster when somebody else has already completed the Y incision. She also says that this is quick and dirty and possibly useless,

as it's going to take her a couple of days to sort out which liver goes with which decedent."

Daphne reached beside her chair for her laptop bag and tucked it under her arm. Juggling the thumb drive, manila folders, and her coffee cup, she still managed to be the first one into the conference room, where Reyes and Falkner were working in what passed for quiet and privacy.

"Bring the sandwiches!" Daphne called over her shoulder, as if there were any chance of Chaz leaving them behind.

Falkner and Reyes glanced up from heaps of gory photos and neighborhood canvass reports as the team entered. Lau let Brady bring up the rear as he preferred, though she made sure the door shut behind them. The aroma of overbrewed coffee filled the cramped conference room--which was bigger than the briefing room at headquarters, to give it its due, and had one less person in it.

Falkner got up stiffly to offer Lau her chair. Lau waved it off, though she knew Faulkner was probably looking for an excuse to stretch. Worth dropped into the vacant seat beside Reyes and booted her laptop, and Chaz and Brady claimed chairs opposite.

"I'll stand," Todd said, resting his coffee on the ledge of the interior window. "I've taken enough chances with deep vein thrombosis already today. What did I miss?"

Quickly, Brady gave him the high points of the scene, drawing at least one grimace. He'd already done it for Reyes, and the narrative was becoming polished. "And now we've got the autopsy reports for both groups of murders," he finished. "Worth?"

"Still reading," Worth said. "Stall."

Chaz snorted, but Reyes shot him a glare that pushed him back in his chair and brought his arms up across his chest. "Sorry," he said. "Okay. I got a chance to slam some this morning, and noticed some things that might be significant, though two is a small sample."

Todd, handing out sandwiches and cookies, slid a wax-paper wrapped parcel in front of Chaz. As unconsciously as a hummingbird taking wing, the beta's long bony hands went to work on the wrapping paper while he continued his

explanation. Lau watched him. He wouldn't catch her eye except by accident, which made paying polite attention without making him uncomfortable somewhat challenging, but while he was distracted by food and profiling she could look at him directly without making him blush like a fire hydrant.

"While both of these killings involved families, it would seem the families have nothing in common. First, the Diazes. Family of seven. Carmen, widowed female head of household, 39. Her brother Carlos, 32. Her mother, also Carmen, 62." He gulped coffee, as if the next words had gotten stuck in his throat. "Four children, three girls--twelve, seven, six--and a boy, eight. No pets. Latino. Grandmother a legal immigrant, Carmen and Carlos both American-born. The grandmother was primary child care, the mother employed at a print shop, the brother at a Whole Foods Market. Second family, the Wilsons. Father, mother, three children. Two teenaged sons and an eight-year old girl."

If the detail of the children rattled Chaz the second time, Lau couldn't see it. He had torn the turkey sandwich in half on the diagonal, but left both pieces on the wrapper, and his fingers rested open on either side. His eyes were half-hooded, concentration turned inward. The familiar non-expression was his hard-earned camouflage. Making himself seem less than he was. Idiot savant, and all his gifts nothing more that feats of rote memory.

"And a dog," he said, and when he looked down at his hands Lau could see the facade broken. He drank more coffee, though, as Todd handed Lau the reserved salad and a cookie. While she unwrapped it, he continued. "Both parents in their early forties. Both born in northern California and relocated here for employment. Denise Wilson was a programmer. Jason Wilson was a software engineer. There's no victimology in common, except the possibility that the UNSUB is choosing mothers and children, and the other family members are collateral damage. The women do have some superficial resemblances, despite the fact that one was Latina and one white. They were dark. And pretty."

"Any chance the Wilsons shopped where Carlos Diaz worked?" Reyes asked, leaning forward.

Chaz held up a hand. "Anything's possible, but the geography would be weird. And I'm just getting to the geography. Because both of these killings

were in one SDPD division--this one. Which didn't exist before March of this year."

"Brand new division," Reyes said. "Brand new butcher."

"It's funny, though," Chaz said. "The reason they put a division out here is because the response time for a priority one call in these neighborhoods was over *twenty-two* minutes. It's dropped since. Why would he start when the police presence was improving?"

"What's it citywide?" Brady asked, with professional curiosity.

"Fourteen point six."

Brady cringed. "That's a long time to be gunshot."

Worth just closed her eyes and breathed, "Ow."

Reyes broke the silence. "He's struck twice, each time on a major holiday, and in each case arranged his victims in a tableau. We need to be asking the usual questions: how does he enter the dwelling? How does he control the victims? What part of this is script and what part is signature? Who's his primary victim? What is his relationship to the victims? Why does he select those particular families?"

The salad had pecans, blue cheese, raisins, and sliced pears heaped atop the greens. For this, Todd apologized? Lau took a bite of cookie and closed her eyes. It wasn't bliss, exactly, but for a moment she thought she appreciated the Hafidha-Chaz perspective on calories.

"I know why he skipped Halloween," Chaz blurted. He blushed behind his fading tan. "Uh. Um, it's not a family holiday. It's not--"

"No mythology of togetherness," Reyes said. "No pretense of felicity. Nothing to *mock*."

Chaz nodded, face stretched around a mortified expression.

"Good," Reyes said, as if he hadn't noticed a thing. "That's a good catch."

Worth said, "So that's the purpose of the staging. What about the booby traps?"

"Booby traps?" Todd had a wodge of sandwich tucked into his cheek. He swallowed hastily, leaning forward.

"The posing is the least of it," Falkner said. "He leaves little presents for the responders. Pipe bombs, dirty needles, buckets of blood balanced on door edges."

"Psychological warfare," Todd said. "That's the thing about booby traps. They maim as often as they kill, and you never see them coming. They're death or a ruined life out of nowhere. He's trying to break morale."

"The extended families are already broken," Chaz said. "None of them are ever going to recover from that." But Brady rocked back in his chair, arms crossed, and Lau saw his chest rise and fall rapidly.

"Son of a bitch," Brady said.

Falkner put a hand on his shoulder. She could do it without making him jump. "Brady?"

"This isn't about the families," he said. "It's about us."

"Expand on that." Falkner stepped away, came around into Brady's field of view--a little behind and to the right of Reyes. But Lau could see the rest of the team had already figured it out. Falkner had too: she just believed in making people drag the guts of their hunches out into the sunlight where everyone interested could get a stick into them.

Brady looked at Lau. Lau tapped her fork against her mouth and said, "You mean his primary victims are the cops. He's feeding off their distress and horror."

"Caution," Reyes said. "We don't know for a fact the anomaly *feeds* off anything. We don't know for a fact this is an anomalous case. We're not even sure there's only one UNSUB."

"Two kinds of victims," Brady said, "But only one goal: hurting the cops. My money's on one guy. Whether it's a host--"

"Lack of blood trails," Lau said. "Those scenes are too clean."

"Too clean for any mortal agency," Brady muttered, and got a strained laugh. He pulled himself upright and continued, "Seriously, y'all. Nikki's right. We're missing something. This guy left no hair, no fiber, no fingerprints. Clean as a professional hit. CSI teams leave more trace evidence. He got in

and out of both houses like he had the keys. And he didn't even track blood around the house? It's like shit doesn't stick to his fur."

Chaz said, "Department morale can't be good to begin with. The city is losing an average of fourteen sworn officers a month."

"Cop," Brady said. "Cop groupie. Failed cop. Wannabe cop. Relative of a cop. Victim of a bad cop--"

Reyes picked up his pen and scratched on his notepad. "How is he observing the officers? He'd want to see the results of his actions."

"News broadcasts," Lau offered, but Reyes shook his head.

"This is a guy who sticks his hands in people's eye sockets and body cavities. That kind of a remove is not going to be close enough." Reyes set the pen down and spun it. "He'll want to see their faces."

Chaz said, "There are twenty-one patrol officers in this division, two sergeants, four detectives. Including Maria Gometz. It's still lightly staffed."

"Room for growth," Falkner muttered.

"What about the women?" Chaz nodded to the bulletin board against the back wall of the conference room, the smiling photos of Carmen Diaz and Denise Wilson. Dark hair, fine features, intelligent eyes.

"They catch his eye," Lau said. "They stand out in a crowd. If it's a male--"

"I think it's a male," Brady said. "Attractive women, cop groupie, the manner in which he controls the families suggests male. I think he'd be a case for Down The Hall even if he wasn't one of ours, honestly. This one came bad out of the package."

Lau nodded. "--He's heterosexual. He might be their age. Roughly forty?"

"Or he might be younger and have mommy issues," Chaz said. "That was Brady's idea, at the scene."

Falkner's face had gone crinkled and strange around her lips. After a moment, she hauled herself out of it and turned to Worth. "Crime scene and autopsy reports?"

"He killed the parents first." Worth's voice came softly. She hadn't touched her sandwich. "In both cases. Except with the second family, before the

parents, he butchered the pet. So the kids got to live through that, and their parents' torture, before they were killed themselves."

Todd said. "So either the kids are the target--Worth, there's girls around eight in both families. Were they the last?"

She shook her head. "The eight year old was the last in the Wilson case. But with the Diazes, it was the six year old. Youngest last. Son of a bitch."

Reyes' fingers twitched as if he wanted to cross himself. Lau couldn't really blame him. "Those poor kids."

Todd said, "Combined with the booby traps, that suggests Brady's on target. If he wanted to hurt the parents, he'd make them watch the children's deaths."

Worth raised her hand for attention. Her color had faded towards a nearly-luminescent green. "He didn't make them watch anything," she said. Lau felt the bile rising, and steeled her jaw against it. "He took their eyes first. Frost says, *As much as two hours antemortem*."

"Jesus Christ in a sidecar," Brady said into the silence that followed a collective intake of breath.

*

Lau was very nearly the last one to leave the conference room, because she was lying in wait for Reyes. She didn't miss the quiet drama across the room, though. When Worth walked out past Chaz, laptop tucked under her arm and eyes front, he reached out and brushed her wrist. "Daphs."

"I'm *fine*," she said, jerking back, then drew herself up short, and said in clipped tones, "Really. The kids just get to me."

"Hey," he said, very quietly. "Stand up on it." And when she glared at him, he nodded slightly. His eyebrows went right up his forehead in the expression that made him look like an earnest Irish wolfhound.

Whatever traveled across the glance that locked them together, Lau couldn't read it. But Worth nodded back, lips pressed thin, and turned away. After Chaz trailed her out forlornly, clutching stray papers, only Lau and Reyes were left.

Reyes was still head down, a pile of papers bent back against his left thumb as he riffled the edges.

Lau cleared her throat. "Is something going on between those two?"

He looked up, and stared thoughtfully at the closed door through which they had passed. "Worth doesn't strike me as the type who would cheat. And unless I miss my guess, Villette has a new girlfriend. But there are other somethings. You wanted to talk to me?"

Stalling for her, after all. She said, "If Brady's right, I think I know how we can lure this guy out. But I wanted to run it past you first."

Reyes let the papers fall from his hand. He squared them side to side with his palms, top to bottom with palm and back of hand. "Shoot."

"If he's gunning for the officers--if the whole point of this is to damage as many cops as possible--is he going to be able to resist a crack at an elite team of federal agents? We're here, right under his nose. We have to be an absolutely beautiful target. And the only thing cops hate worse than cases involving kids is cases involving fellow officers. A gamma will sacrifice itself to maximize suffering."

"There isn't a holiday coming up."

Lau pushed her hair back. "I think the strategy is implicit in the profile. I think the holidays are a tool, not a signature. I think the host is picking them to be horrible on purpose. And I think if we warn the community, alert the local media, then give him the opportunity to be horrible to us, he might make a mistake."

The pile finally tidied to his satisfaction, Reyes balanced his palmtop on it and settled back in his chair. The heavy lines around his mouth smoothed into a non-expression, and not for the first time, Lau wished he were less adept at hiding what he thought.

"You want to use one of us as bait," he said.

She nodded, smoothing her palms against her thighs so she would not give in to the urge to twist her fingers together.

"Brady?" he asked. "If the host is carrying some sort of grudge against law enforcement, he's the natural choice."

"No," she said. "He likes to kill the pet first."

This time, Reyes actually gave her something. Eyebrows, a considering, respectful expression. "Chaz?"

"Me," Lau said. "The cute one. The public face of the team. Chaz said it--the women are striking. Dark-haired. Ethnicity doesn't seem to be his kink. I'm too young, but that might not matter if we gave him enough other triggers. And the cops are on to his booby traps now, sir. If Brady is right, he's going to have to escalate to get his kicks."

Silence, long and thoughtful, until Reyes reached out with one finger and shifted the Palm a quarter-turn, so it lay horizontally across the pile of paperwork. "We don't get hazard pay."

"I'm bulletproof," Lau said, though her hands were chilling. What would Hafidha say? "I can take a li'l ol' UNSUB, bossman."

Without lowering his eyes, Reyes frowned at her. "To catch a tiger, stake out a goat."

"Right," Lau said.

"You don't have to redeem yourself, you know. We make mistakes. It's a natural consequence of trying to do extremely hard things."

Easy for you to say. "It's a way to catch him," Lau said, stubbornly.

Reyes stood. "I'll take it under advisement."

Act III

When Lau emerged from the conference room, thirty seconds ahead of Reyes, Falkner pounced. Lau expected to be asked what the private conference had been about, but instead Falkner said, "Would you call Hafidha for me and tell her she can go home, as long as she keeps her cell on? We're going to be here all night, but there's no reason she has to."

Reyes never would have thought of that. Lau said loyally: "She'd stay."

"I happen to know she has a date," Falkner answered. "Tell her to relax. We're not going anywhere tonight unless something bad happens."

As Lau had expected, Hafidha took some convincing. Her voice tinny over the cell connection, she protested, "It's no problem, honey. I will just call up my gentleman friend and he can bring me over a bucket of fried chicken and leave it at Security. If he thinks I'm worth waiting for, he'll be glad to oblige, and I can make it up to him on Monday."

"Hafs," Lau said, palm to her forehead as Brady walked past en route to the coffeepot, "Go, have fun, go home, get a real night's sleep and come back in the morning, okay? We'll need you rested tomorrow, and you've already gotten us those lists of responding officers and checked every newspaper in Cali for recurring names, right?"

Hafidha sighed. "I hate to think I might not be where I'm needed."

She needed to be indispensable. In an honest moment, Lau would admit complete sympathy. She said, "Drop your iBook in that Sherpa pouch you call a purse and go. If we need you, trust me, you will be called to serve. Now go have fun, drat you. And have some for me too. I need to go catch somebody."

"Gates out, sugar," Hafidha said, and cut the connection. Lau dropped the phone into the pocket of her borrowed suit jacket--one of Worth's, and much too broad across the shoulders, but at least it didn't flap around her ankles as it would have if she'd raided Falkner's jump bag--and took three quick steps after Brady.

"Danny, pour me a coffee, please?"

She barely came up to chest height on him, and she knew they made a thoroughly ridiculous pair--Brady tall and broad and golden as a shield, her dark and slender as a combat knife. Something a comic-book artist would consider a good visual contrast.

Brady was always a gentleman, and the quirk at the corner of his mouth told her he enjoyed the opportunity to be of service. *A failing common to the model,* she thought. He poured the coffee, added cream, and took the stirrer out before he handed it over. Then he sighed and picked up his own cup. He stared into it rather than drinking, slumped with one hand stuffed in his trouser pocket.

"Kids?" Lau said. She suspected Brady didn't have a soul on earth to talk to. If it got bad, Nikki could always call her mom, her brother Tim and his wife,

her ex-sister-in-law Dana--who was still Nikki's best friend, though the marrying Dana's brother thing hadn't worked out so well. They might not *get* it--nobody who didn't do the job ever really got it--but they assumed she could take care of herself, and they'd distract her with endless tales of normal life until she forgot she was supposed to be invulnerable. But Brady--who did Brady have?

Well, Nikki Lau. For a start.

"Yeah," Brady said. "Well, and using them to get to the responding officers. That's just so fucking evil." His arm pressed to his side, as if at a chill.

"They're *all* evil," Lau said, in commiseration. "It's what makes them hosts, and Not Chaz. And it's what makes us the Good Guys, right? The good part? Something has to oppose evil, and antiheros are only interesting in Clint Eastwood movies. In real life, you kind of want to hit them with a shoe." She bounced on her toes to draw his attention. "Even if you do think you're the goddamn Batman."

It didn't make him smile, and he still didn't raise the coffee cup. "I dunno why the kids get me so bad. I mean, it's not like--"

She banged him lightly in the ribs with her elbow before the self-pity brimmed over. He rolled his eyes and shook his head, but reinflated a little. "Hey." She checked over her shoulder for eavesdroppers. Out to your coworkers wasn't the same thing as out to any redneck cop who happened to wander by. "You never know. Maybe there's a nice single dad out there with your name on him."

"Nikki!" Scandalized. But at least he was laughing. "All right. All right. And we're going to catch him before he can do it again, right?"

"Right," she said. "You keep bringing me coffee. I'll find the bad guy."

She winked at his mock-irate stare, and ducked before his elbow connected with the side of her head. "Ow!" she protested, though he'd missed her by a mile.

He grinned back. "Hey, Lau. You're a pretty good buddy, you know."

She was about to concur that she did, in fact, know, when Reyes walked by and blasted them with a glare that brought Lau's shoulders up around her ears.

"Guess I'm not the only one taking it hard," Brady said.

Lau turned away, but shot back, "Coffee break's over. Everybody back on your heads."

*

Sunrise on Saturday found Chaz sitting at the same desk, sucking down coffee laced with heavy cream and powering through four months of duty rosters like a car toiling uphill in heavy snow. The pattern hovered at the edge of his attention, frustrating and incomplete.

He thought of it like balancing blocks, one of those children's games he'd always been too clumsy to manage well. Lousy fine motor control. Too much processing power in use for other things. He shrugged his oversized tweed jacket higher on his shoulders, fighting the early-morning chill, and reached for his coffee.

Empty. He frowned into the mug, trying to decide if it was worthwhile getting up for another, or if he should go in search of food again already. He was out of granola bars, and the breakfast burrito he'd eaten at three AM was only a memory, but he hated to take a break.

If he fell over, Daphne and Brady would glare. And while he could think of something more embarrassing than fainting in front of Lau, the *idea* was enough to make his face feel hot. Besides, he had to log his caloric intake in his online food journal to keep Daphne and Hafidha happy. Which meant they would know exactly how much he was eating. Or wasn't eating, as the case might be.

A rattle of paper drew his attention. When he looked up, Worth stood beside him, clutching a grocery sack to her chest. She set all fourteen and a half pounds (approximately) down on the empty desk he'd appropriated--a brand new station house meant a lot of available space, for a change--and reached in the top.

"Daphs?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I can smell you thinking." .

Chaz sniffed his own shoulder and caught the sweetish rotten-fruit whiff of acetone. "Ick," he said. "Sorry. Ketosis."

"Mmm." She pulled things from the bag. A red plastic bowl, like a kid's ice cream bowl. A metal spoon with an even redder handle. A gallon jug of orange juice. A sloshing half-gallon of organic 2% milk, the outside dewed with condensation that wetted Daphne's fingers. "And the *pièce de résistance*--"

A 21-ounce box of Cinnamon Life cereal. Two thousand, two hundred and eighty calories of mostly-carbohydrate, on the hoof. Added to the milk, somewhere around 3,250. Half his daily requirement in one fell swoop, with a little extra to cover for jamming, and that wasn't even counting the OJ. Chaz grabbed the box before she had a chance to set it down on the table and prised the lid up with his fingernails. "Thank you, thank you, thank you--"

She cracked the milk while he poured out two and a half cups of cereal, then handed him the spoon with a snap as practiced as a scrub nurse presenting a scalpel. Chaz leaned forward over the desk so the milk dripping down his chin would splash back into the bowl instead of across his sweater. When he looked up, Daphne was replacing his coffee cup. "Goddess."

She ruffled his hair. "Consider it a small apology for biting your head off last night."

"Lau thinks we're sleeping together."

It was worth it to see her eyebrows rise. "You and me? She said that?"

"Profiler," Chaz reminded. "She did quite the double-take when you snapped."

Daphne snorted. "I won't tell Amarilis if you don't tell Tricia." She jerked her head at the gray-golden light glazing the windows across the bullpen. "Cop shop with daylight. Who'd have thunk it?"

"I wonder about the defensive architecture. There's a whole bunch of antimeasures built into that facade." Chaz put the bowl down and reached for the cereal box again.

Daphne stopped him, and handed him a paper napkin. "Professionalism, Anomaly-boy."

He snorted, but wiped his chin. "Sorry. I can't get this damned case to snap together. It's *maddening*. I am getting some interesting stuff out of the duty rosters and responding officer reports. So far, what I've got is that the

incidents were reported on different shifts. The actual murders occurred several hours before." He lowered his voice. "Brady thought we should check the responding officers. A cop could get into almost anyone's house."

"Different shifts means different officers."

"Rotation," Chaz said. "Same officers, different shift. The shift that was on evenings in July is on nights now."

"And people remember a cop car parked in front of a neighbor's house."

"Point." He shoveled more cereal, trying to maintain the appearance of decorum. "Especially if the neighbors turn up horribly slaughtered later that night. There's under thirty sworn officers in the division, but that actually slows us down."

"How's that?"

He tapped the pile of papers he'd shoved to the side. "Most of the first responders were the same both times. So if he's just doing it for one person, well, trying to narrow it down by Venn diagram isn't as helpful as it could be. Still, it's not like it's that complicated a system. I feel like I'm missing something."

"Do you think he is? Just doing it for one person?" She spun a chair around and settled into it, frowning.

Chaz set the spoon in the empty bowl and wiped his mouth again. "I think I don't know yet." The admission stung. *Useless*, he thought, which was something he had gotten used to not thinking since he joined the BAU. He shook it off and said, "So the question we have to keep asking ourselves, if the responding officers are his primary target, how did he find the victims? And what's his relationship with them?"

"He hates them," Daphne said. "Though whether specifically or in general, I'm not sure. But that's it with gammas, right? They go after the people the hosts loved most, before, or the ones they hated."

Chaz tasted the coffee she'd brought and changed the subject. "So what are you doing today?"

"Lau and I are interviewing one of the officers injured at the first scene," she answered. "Wish us luck. And finish your cereal."

"People are staring." He pushed the bowl away with his fingertips.

She shrugged. "They're just jealous, Platypus. Let 'em stare."

*

Her name was Alice Wagner, and she was blind. She sat perfectly composed in the center of a chintz loveseat in her mother's home, her eyes concealed by opaque glasses, hands folded between her knees. A light-skinned African-American woman, broad-featured behind the pale burn scars that streaked her face, she wore her hair cropped close to her skull. She was still fit, forearms muscled below the cuffs of her three-quarter-length sleeves, and Lau wondered how she managed it. Sympathetic workout partner and a lot of determination, maybe.

"I'm Agent Lau," Lau said. "And this is Agent Worth. We're here because we're--"

"Interested in how I got hurt."

"Yes."

"You're working the serial killer case."

"Yes," Lau said.

Alice Wagner licked her lips. "I was a good cop," she said. Hard, firmly, as if it was as important for her to believe it as for Lau. "I was just in too much of a hurry."

"Everyone connected with the case" --Lau paused for emphasis-- "told us you were on your way up, Ma'am."

"It was lye," Wagner said, and Lau winced in horrified sympathy.

It didn't matter. The former officer couldn't see her, and it would have been an imposition to take her hand.

"Son of a bitch," Worth said. And she--fearless, or courageous--did reach out and clasp Wagner's wrist. Wagner turned her hand over, as if grateful, and returned the grip. Her face did something brave and futile--Lau imagined, for a moment, what it would be like to watch Brady's face do that, or Hafidha's, or Worth's--then smoothed as if nothing could touch her. Bulletproof.

"We're going to get him," Worth promised, and Lau saw Wagner's fingers ripple convulsively against Worth's wrist and hoped it was the truth.

Act IV

Before dinner, Chaz tried to call Amarilis again, but her home line and cell both rang through to voicemail. His job made him reach for the worst-case scenarios, but objectively he knew that on the east coast, it was ten o'clock on Saturday night and if she wasn't at a movie she was out dancing. He left her a cheerful and flirtatious message--on the grounds that he would have liked to get one--and dropped his Adorable Overhyped Phone back into his pocket before trekking down the stairs to meet the rest of the team for dinner.

Because Lau insisted, they wound up on an excursion to a place in the Gaslamp district called The Field. As she pointed out, they all needed the break. And maybe, as Reyes would put it, they all needed a chance to spitball the case without the local PD staring over their shoulders.

The restaurant looked unprepossessing from the sidewalk: what Chaz's old BASE pal Nigel would have called a B.S.I.P.--bog-standard Irish pub--American edition, one each. Nigel would then have embarked upon an explanation of why all the good Irish pubs were in America, and how impossible it was to get a pub salad in Ireland containing anything other than iceberg lettuce. Chaz wondered if Nigel was still jumping, and if not if it was because he'd retired or because he'd made a crater.

When they entered, Chaz began to understand Lau's insistence. The doorway led to a long dim corridor crowded with booths and stools, and savory smells floated on the air. A waiter glided past, balancing a tray with three perfect creamy pints of Guinness. Todd turned to catch Chaz's eye and smile. At the rear of the pack, Brady muttered, "Do you suppose they have Coors?"

"They have Stella Artois," Lau said over her shoulder. "And you will drink it, and not embarrass me."

Chaz didn't think Brady was cowed, but he subsided. Not that you could ever miss his presence back there. It was practical, anyway: Brady was tall enough to shoot over everybody else's head, if he had to.

Except for Chaz's. Which was why Chaz tended to fade to the rear as well. Well, that and getting to walk behind Lau.

The hostess who met them inside cried "Nikki! Hi!" and brought the seven of them up a narrow flight of stairs to a long table with benches on either side, a chair on one end, and a *reserved* sign.

Chaz stood aside to let Reyes claim the seat on the left end of the table, facing the windows and stair, then plunked down next to him. He could eat left-handed as well as the other way, so his elbow wouldn't bother whoever sat on his right. Daphne, it turned out, and Falkner sat across from Reyes, Todd across from Chaz, and Lau across from Daphs. Brady, in deference to his shoulders, got the chair on the end.

There was brief, cheerful chaos as the waitress--"I'm Liz. I'll be your server."--came by with menus and drinks were ordered (starting with Daphne: Guinness, Guinness, Guinness, Guinness-and-Black, Guinness, Guinness, and a reluctant Stella Artois). Liz was a curvy--some might say chunky--brunette with gleaming cheeks, plump cleavage, and electric blue eyes. She wielded what Chaz presumed was a British--not Irish--accent like both carrot and stick, and the detached analytical portion of his mind wondered if he or Todd was more likely to hurt himself trying to impress her.

Whoa, cowboy. Pretty brown girl at home, remember?

Which made him smile a little wistfully, which made Daphne kick him under the table when it was his turn to order. He grabbed the menu, consulted his internal gauges, and chose nearly at random. "Shepherd's pie, please, and bangers and champ, and a vegetable boxty?"

Liz-the-server blinked, but recovered quickly. "We've a sampler plate. Would you like that?"

Chaz smiled his widest and most disarming smile. "Full orders, please, and all the sides. I'll get through it, I promise. With room for dessert."

Daphne--either riding to the rescue or looking for an opportunity to flirt--raised big eyes and asked. "I'm sorry, miss. What's 'champ?'"

"Mashed potatoes," Todd said. He pretended not to look up from his menu, but Chaz saw him glance sidelong at the waitress. So Chaz corrected, "with scallions."

"Green onions, love," she said with a wink, sidling around behind Falkner and Todd. She slid the menu out of Todd's hand, polished his bald spot lightly with her towel, and said, "And is that what you'll be having, gorgeous?"

Todd actually stammered, but made a decent recovery, and even without recourse to the menu managed, "Guinness beef boxty for me, please."

"God," Lau said, as Liz trotted lightly down the stairs, "I love this place."

Reyes traced a line in the condensation on his water glass. "They import the help as well as the chairs?"

"British, isn't she?" Chaz asked.

Todd shook his head. "Irish. She's a Dub. It's one of those accents that sounds like everywhere else. Sure is musical, though." He paused and drank water. "All right, Lau. Out with it. You've gathered us here tonight for a reason."

Lau tucked the short side of her bob behind her ear, eyes wide and all but gleaming with innocence. "Sol," she said, sweetly. "I'd never--"

Reyes cleared his throat, and Lau laughed and sat back in her chair. "All right, all right. I want to try something tomorrow, to see if we can lure the host out. And I didn't want to talk about it at the station. In case--"

"It's one of them," Brady finished for her.

"Yeah," she said. "How much do I have to sell this?"

"Harder than that," Reyes said.

"Host psychology," she said. "We need to figure out this guy's mythology and work it. We can't stay here until Christmas, and we aren't finding what we need to get him now."

Her voice dropped off as feet climbed the stairs. First to appear was a tray laden with five pearl-topped glasses of Guinness, Falkner's stout-and-blackcurrant-cordial cocktail, and Brady's Stella set a little aside from the others, like a white raven among the black. Immediately after followed Liz's tensed fingers and her arm, then her head, and the rest of her. She turned the corner and said "Whew. For a moment there, I wasn't sure I'd make it."

She came to Falkner's end of the table to serve her first--Reyes grinned at his second-in-command, who was apparently being presumed the matriarch--and set Todd's stout down before leaning over to place Reyes' and Chaz's drinks before them.

Teal blue lace. With a front clasp.

Manfully, Chaz pinned his eyes on Todd's face and asked, "How's the Guinness?"

Todd, licking at a stout moustache, nodded, lower lip quirking. Before Liz straightened, though, he leaned over and said something Chaz didn't catch in her ear. All she answered was, "Of course, love." No help there, and then she vanished down the stairs again. Chaz gulped the first mouthful of Guinness, doing it a disservice: in character, Todd had undersold. Chaz's left leg itched. There was probably some sort of folklore about that.

"She's gunning for a big tip," Brady said sourly.

Daphne picked the paper off her water straw and flicked it at him. "She's going to get it, too. Nikki, your plan. Spin it."

"Television. Media blitz. If we're guessing right about his psychology, he wants to punish the responding officers. The holidays are just another way to make it worse, right? So what could be a more tempting target for somebody like that than a team of FBI agents and their cute little media-face?"

"Nikki--" Brady's voice was heated, and as unhappy as Chaz's instinctive reaction. Chaz bit his lip and let Brady take point. Lau was more likely to listen to the Texan, anyway. Especially when Brady sat back, folded his arms, and tempered his tone. "Are you sure that's your first beer?"

"It's a good plan," Lau said.

"Absolutely not," Falkner said. "We don't risk officer lives."

"It's that or wait for Christmas, Chief," Lau said, eyebrows drawing together. "And hope SDPD can get ahead of him then. The anomaly doesn't care about the host. It's just interested in carnage. If we give it a juicy enough target, the gamma might stop fucking around with innocent families and sacrifice itself for maximum effect. None of the responding officers were badly injured at the second scene. He didn't get his fix. But a shooting spree in a cop shop

would fuck up the law enforcement community *nationwide*. And if I can think of it, he already has."

Chaz's pulse jumped, thrilling in his wrists and throat. A cold tingle of realization chilled his fingers. He interrupted with his beer halfway to his mouth. "Eyes," he said, and watched the team react. "Eyes. I have no idea how the hell I missed it. He blinds the families. He blinded a responding officer. The booby traps at the Wilson house--some, okay, are just gross or play on cop's-worst-nightmare scenarios, like the needle sticks. But the acid in the Supersoaker. The home-made explosives. They might not kill, but if they went off in your face--"

"They were under cabinets and so forth," Brady said. "Head height. It's why the bomb squad got them all without too much trouble; they could *see* them."

Chaz caught himself rocking excitedly against the table edge, and stopped before Daphne realized she could make him stop by stabbing him with her fork. "Right. So the thing is, is he angry about not being seen? Or is he making sure nobody can see him?"

Reyes bit his knuckle. "He blinded the families."

"Before he did anything else," Daphne said.

Reyes turned his head and winced. He laid both hands flat on the table and said, "He made them listen. His manifestation is something that prevents him from having an impact on his environment. No trace evidence. His mythology, then, is that he's a forgotten man. Somebody who moves through the world unremarkable and unremarked. Fascinating."

"What do you mean?" Brady folded both hands around his beer, effectively vanishing the glass.

"The gamma," Reyes said. "Two different manifestations that conform to the host's mythology. If he passes unnoticed by people who are present and accounted for, that has to be neurologically produced. A different mechanism than the ability to walk through a crime scene toting dripping meat and not leave a bootmark. Two different physical mechanisms... but both consistent with the gamma's picture of himself and his rationalization for what he does. And that's how he enters the houses. Nobody notices he's not supposed to be there. Maybe not even the security system."

Worth's gaze crossed Todd's, but it was Todd who said, "You mean a possible third mechanism. All in the context of the same metaphor. Whoa."

Chaz said, "His metaphor expresses itself variously. Like Spiderman's spider-powers."

Daphne shuddered. "We really really gotta stop this guy."

The itch on Chaz's ankle wasn't going away. Furtively, he hiked up the leg of his corduroys and scratched on both sides of the knotted hemp band around his calf. Long arms came in handy sometimes. He caught Todd's eye and mouthed, "*Attention must be paid*."

Todd bit his lip and shook his head in frustration. "You're saying he's functionally invisible."

"No," Chaz started, but Reyes beat him to it.

"I'm saying he passes unnoticed." Reyes took a long pull of his Guinness, then set it down and stared at it regretfully. "He's not invisible. You'd notice an invisible thing. You'd *walk into him.* I'm saying that Brady is right. Shit doesn't stick to his fur."

"And Brady's right about something else," Falkner said. "He's at the cop shop. Which is why we didn't think of any of this there. Because we didn't notice that we weren't noticing him."

Lau nodded and said, "Of course. He tortures the cops. And he's standing right there watching. It's the best of both worlds: he's the center of attention and nobody even knows it. And he can see every reaction to the horrible things he does."

Chaz could tell that Falkner wanted to argue, but she picked up her water instead. Chaz mirrored her with his Guinness, an uncomfortable awareness tickling his stomach. Like the itch, he tried to ignore it. And like the itch, it would not be silenced.

Somebody like that would create a wake. You might not be able to see him. But you'd be able to see what he did to others, in passing by. Like the elongated blood drops spattered on the stair runner: he might leave no trace of himself, but that didn't mean the things he affected would go unnoticed. There would be patterns.

Chaz said, ""He's one of them. I'm sure of it. Dammit. I should have connected before. Both sets of victims had made 911 calls within the last year. Before the Northwest Division opened. The Diazes for a domestic disturbance at a neighbor's house. The Wilsons for celebratory gunfire on New Year's Eve. *I just remembered it now.*"

The idea of a gamma casually rearranging the contents of his skull made Chaz want to wrinkle his nose and mince backwards like a cat confronted with a maggot-riddled corpse. Judging by the expressions around the table, his revulsion wasn't unique.

Into the silence that followed, Lau said, "We *have* to make him come to us."

Falkner said, "Why don't we just interview everybody who works in the cop shop? We know he's a cop groupie if he's not one of the officers. We can narrow it down, start with civilian employees who at some point enrolled in police training or attempted to--"

"If he didn't bolt," Reyes said, "we just might miss him. He wouldn't show up that day and nobody would think to mention it. Or his name wouldn't get on the list. He's *overlooked*. It's what he does." He drew short lines in the condensation on his beer. "I'm sorry, Lau. Your plan won't work. We can't protect you from somebody we can't notice coming."

Chaz caught himself twisting his hands together, staring down at the table, and forced himself to stop. These people were his family, the only one he had. To them, he was a co-worker, a useful adjunct to the all-consuming job. If he couldn't be useful to them, what good was he?

Chaz opened up his mouth and--through the sticky dryness of his tongue--said, "I could see him coming."

Every head at the table turned, and every pair of eyes fastened on Chaz.

"Maybe," Chaz qualified, and dropped his gaze to the backs of his hands again. There was still a swallow of Guinness in his glass. He drank it, concentrating on the slightly-stale bitterness of those last few drops, the way the creaminess had evolved into something else. "I'd have to look for the person whose existence wasn't accounted for in the patterns of unconscious communication and eye contact and body language that flow around a room. The guy people avoid without acknowledging."

Daphne said, "Chaz. You'd have to be slamming neurons *all the time*."

Lau fiddled with her glass right-handed, dabbling a fingertip in the foam. "Christmas morning," she said. "Think about it. A month of anticipation, and then--"

"More dead kids," Chaz said, startled to find himself on Lau's side in this. "Kids who stayed up all night waiting for Santa. Another six-year-old nailed to a chair. Are we going to let that happen?"

Reyes regarded him impassively, hands folded on the table. "Can you do it? Honestly. If you can, we'll roll the dice."

If Chaz had thought his heart was thundering in his ears a moment before, now it was beating out "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Nine months before, Reyes had been unwilling to permit Chaz into the field. Now he was prepared to make Chaz the crux of the operation.

On the chance that Chaz's broken, internal manifestation could trump everything a full-fledged gamma could throw at them. The trust--or the willingness to gamble--made Chaz's stomach clench. Lau's life would be the bet.

Sweat greased Chaz's palms. He dried them surreptitiously on his napkin and strove to keep his voice light as he answered, "You want to know if my kung fu is superior to his kung fu. Master, I cannot answer that question until battle is joined."

"Chaz--" Falkner leaned forward. "If we do this, it's all on you. You can't let your guard drop. You're our secret weapon. Nobody else stands a chance of spotting him."

"Just keep the ice cream cones coming."

God bless and keep Nikki Lau, she broke the tension with a tapping hand and said, "So he thinks he's the forgotten man. And we put him on television. That's attention, man."

Reyes shook his head. "We put him on television, and we don't give him any attention. That ought to drive him out of his tree."

If he had been about to explain further--and knowing Reyes and his addiction to magic tricks, Chaz could not be sure--it was interrupted by Liz's

triumphant return at the head of a caravan of bus boys. Pints and water glasses were pushed aside, plates deposited, and a certain amount of engineering was required to get Chaz's food in front of him. When the plates were arranged to her satisfaction and the bus boys dismissed, she turned her head and studied him like a bird. "I wish I were able to stay and watch this."

He grinned at her and picked up his fork. "Come back and check progress?"

"Don't bother," Daphne said. "You'd spend so much time running up those stairs you'd never get your work done. But trust me, he'll do it justice."

Liz clicked her tongue. "Well, at least it doesn't go to his hips," she said, and beat her retreat while Chaz was still considering his retort.

Ah well.

Instead, he scooped .75 ounces of champ (approximately 18 calories) onto his fork, dipped the lump in pooled butter, and stuck it in his mouth. And closed his eyes and made a happy sound.

Whatever Lau was proposing, with a jammer and three ex-soldiers at the table, eating became a serious business, carried out with dedicated concentration. They took their down time when they could get it. But by the time Chaz was finishing up his boxty--crisp vegetables and creamy white sauce wrapped in a potato pancake--everybody else was slowing down as well. He stacked the third plate on top of the two empty ones, settled back and sighed.

A slow roll of applause from the stairwell turned his head. Liz apparently had returned to check on him, or at least to ask the server's ceremonial question of the table: "Is everything OK?"

Chaz saluted with his fork. Brady was mopping the Irish stew gravy off his own plate with the last of a slice of bread. He had nearly finished the Stella, though he seemed to be eyeing the last few mouthfuls with respect. Chaz wondered if anybody had warned him about the alcohol content.

Liz topped the risers and paused. She didn't pull out her notepad, but then, she hadn't used it to take their dinner orders either. "Who saved room for dessert?"

"Bread pudding?" Chaz asked, hopefully, trying to get a plaintive note into his voice. He wasn't actually hungry any more--not painfully so, anyway--

but he had some idea of the amount of calories he'd run through today, and tomorrow looked to be nothing but jamming. "And an Irish coffee with extra whipped cream."

Liz shook her head, impressed, and looked around the table. "Anyone else? When you smell it, I promise you'll want some."

Brady raised his hand, and so did Todd, once he and Lau and Worth had haggled out a quick and dirty contract to split an order. "None for me, but coffee all round," Reyes said. "And one tea."

Liz raised a saucy eyebrow at Falkner. "Nothing for you, love? The bread pudding *is* lovely. And you know how men are--you shouldn't count on this lot to share."

Falkner, however, just smiled and said, "Oh, they give me pretty much anything I ask for. Just bring me an extra fork, please."

"Yes, ma'am," Liz said, and vanished down the stairs. When she came back with dessert, she served them starting from Falkner's end of the table again, then came back and rested a hand on Todd's shoulder while she handed him the check. "I'll take that up whenever you're ready, gorgeous," she said, but while he was reaching for his credit card, Falkner swiped the black leather folder out of his right hand.

"Hey!" he said.

And she said, "Expense account," and that was that.

Chaz didn't miss it when Falkner extracted a folded slip of paper that had been tucked in with the check, glanced at it, and handed it to Todd--who promptly blushed to the roots of what hair he had left. He slid it into his shirt pocket, all the same.

*

Reyes did not look up when, on the way back to the SUVs, Chaz shortened his stride to fall back beside him. He sort of thought Reyes had expected it, because he was alone, slightly behind the group, and radiating concentration, which would tend to keep the team at bay. Nobody bugged Dad when he was thinking unless it was important.

Chaz kind of worried that this was important.

"Thank you," he said, when Reyes looked up.

Reyes' stare was more appraising than welcoming, and Chaz didn't blame him. "You keep a lot of secrets, Villette."

A projection that made Chaz wonder what secrets *Reyes* was keeping. And if they were any of Chaz's business. He lowered his voice. "You don't trust me."

The Gaslamp district was crowded on a Saturday night, the old treelined streets threaded with merrymakers. Enough noise and confusion to cover a quiet conversation, even if someone else on the team was trying to eavesdrop. Nevertheless, Reyes answered in an undertone. "I don't trust the anomaly."

"I'm not a monster, sir."

The stare lingered for a moment before it dropped away. "Nobody's hoping to prove you are."

Melinda Grossman hadn't been a monster either. Dave Schumacher might have been weak, but he'd been trying to do what was right. And how did you know what was right, when the It whispered in your ear with the still, small voice of conscience or schizophrenia? Jessi Kelly thought she'd done the right thing. Eddie Cieslewicz finally figured out that what he thought was right was wrong.

Chaz wondered if part of what made the pain taste good was the host's suffering, too. He reminded himself, *but we don't know that it tastes like anything. We just know the anomaly maximizes hurt, and hurt to the survivors as well as the victims.*

Some hosts really were monsters. Some reveled in their monstrosity. They were willing accomplices. Hunting them wasn't so different from profiling serial killers. Chaz thought of that as a kind of failure mode: break somebody in the right ways, and they shattered into an UNSUB. And some of those enjoyed their work.

But some hosts--and some killers--were conflicted, driven by a compulsion. An addiction. When he tried to understand it, that craving to play out a script that only ended with somebody else terribly dead, Chaz thought in terms of basic biological drives. The relentless pressure of sexual desire, that could

fill up every waking second if you let it. Hunger, and he knew exactly how far he'd go if he were hungry enough. He'd never killed, but he'd cheated and he'd stolen. One more thing to make up for.

You could decide what you would do to meet those needs. And he told himself--he hoped--that the gammas he hunted were the hosts who weren't willing to do what they had to do to control the anomaly. *You would be stronger. You would make a better choice.*

Everybody believed that until they were tested, of course. One more way hosts--even the ones who weren't also serial killers--were like serial killers. They all had to be stopped. But some would help you stop them.

It was a kind of awful courage, he supposed.

Chaz realized they'd come two blocks since Reyes had spoken, and that Reyes was still stealing glances at him every few feet. Chaz said, "Lau and I are asking for a lot of trust."

Reyes shrugged, and now he stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned away with finality. "Just don't make me regret giving it."

Act V

Sunday, in the station house bathroom mirror, Nikki Lau applied her mask. Foundation, contour. Liner open at the corners so it would not make her eyes seem small. She touched up the mascara with a curved brush, followed by a slow blink to settle it. She covered a stray dark brown dot on her eyelid with a dab of maquillage, while sending up a silent prayer of thanksgiving to Connie Chung and the sisters who had gone before. Once she would have had to mix her own, but these days, Lau could buy foundation that more or less matched her skin straight out of the tube. Lipliner, powder, then lipstick last of all, an understated shade.

She faced the mirror under unforgiving light, her immaculate warpaint in place. "Knight in shining armor," she whispered to her reflection, and managed not to jump when the door banged open. It was Maria Gometz, holding up three fingers. "Your public awaits."

Lau glanced at the polish on her short nails one last time--patches would pass, but chips showed--squared her shoulders, and collected the brand-new

crimson suit jacket off the hook beside the door. "Ready," she said, and let Maria lead her out.

A once-familiar voice broke through her pregame concentration, snapping her head around. "Nikki Lau! Somebody told me you grew up to be a g-man, but I didn't believe it."

Lau closed her eyes and counted three, checked to make sure her smile felt like it was sitting right on her face, and turned to face Troy Kingman with her chin up.

Tall, with wavy brown hair and a blue-shaved cleft chin, he held his arms out, clearly expecting a hug. Lau leaned in gingerly, careful of her foundation, and gave him an A-frame squeeze. He pressed her back to arm's length a moment later and frowned at her. "So it's true? You're a Fed? What a waste of a face for television."

Saving lives. Way down there under market share in terms of importance.

And if she didn't have the right resources to save these lives? She'd rather not know the answer to that question.

She'd never liked Kingman, but in school he'd come free with Dana and Richard Collier, and wherever they were, Nikki was too. She hadn't seen him since before the divorce, though. You grew up, got a job, got busy-- She said, "You're just lucky I didn't stay in the market. Or I'd be beating your audience two to one."

He shook her teasing off with rolled eyes. And, inevitably, asked, "How's Dicky?"

Lau was ready for it, because any idiot could have seen it coming. "Good, I guess," she said. "We got divorced. We're still in touch, though."

"Oh, I'm sorry--" he started, but she stopped the sympathy with an upraised hand.

"Don't worry. You didn't know. It wasn't ugly."

"I can't imagine it would be," he said, drifting back a step, while Lau wondered what sort of woman used the news of her own divorce to distract an old acquaintance from the scent. "You were both great people."

"We still are," she answered, with a hair-flip.

He grinned. "So have you got any insider information for me, or shall I run with 'police and the FBI are baffled?'"

Lau bit her tongue, hard. It was about the artful lie, and Kingman just wanted to provoke her. So she could appear to be provoked, and give him only what she chose. "You know I can't slip you anything under the table. Even for old time's sake."

Maria, bless her, tugged Lau's elbow. "Special Agent--"

"Right," Lau said. "Sorry, Troy. We should do lunch the next time I'm in SoCal."

"What about tomorrow?"

She shrugged, and didn't say *off the record*. "Sorry. Can't. We're headed home tonight. There's nothing more we can do here. We don't believe the UNSUB will strike again before Christmas, and at this point we don't have any forensic evidence to go on, or any behavioral leads, so we're handing the investigation back to local police."

His eyes widened, but he got his expression under control. While he was organizing his thoughts, Lau let Maria lead her into the area set up as a briefing room.

The press conference was scheduled to coincide with the local morning show live slots, and in the wake of two gory, sensational crimes, it was packed with reporters. And Chaz and Brady, seated as if insignificant in the far corner. Lau would be alone in front of the cameras, and the rest of the team as inevident as possible. Falkner and Brady had both protested the move, but Reyes had backed her up, so Lau got to play it her way.

So far, the killer had used a knife. But she was wearing a vest under her immaculate blouse. Just in case. So she really was bulletproof. Or bullet-resistant, anyway.

She got behind the podium and was introduced. She hadn't cinched the ballistic vest tight enough, and she felt the Walther shift in sweat against her back and pinch. As she leaned forward to the microphones, her heart hammered and her ears buzzed. It wasn't her job to scan the room; it was her job to hold the room, to make eye contact and connect with each one of them.

Chaz had her back.

And Brady had Chaz's back.

And Brady and Chaz each had a panic-button, in the form of a disposable cell phone with Falkner's number on one-touch dial. That would have to be enough, because it was her job to get up here and make the bastard want to scratch the Teflon right off of her.

"Hello," Lau said. "I'm Special Agent Nicolette Lau, representing the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I'm here today to talk to you about the investigation into a pair of multiple murders that have taken place in the Northwestern District in the last six months. First, I'm going to present a profile of the individual we believe is responsible. Then I am going to be available for questions for as long as you need me."

She paused for breath, and to pace the address, and couldn't stop herself from flicking her eyes once across the gathered crowd. Troy Kingman was just slipping in the back, folding his cellphone shut.

Nikki bit the inside of her cheek so she wouldn't smile. "We are seeking information on an individual who will appear insignificant to acquaintances, the sort of person you barely remember having held a conversation with. He will seem ineffectual, incompetent. He will hold an unskilled job, and will not have completed higher education--"

*

Saturday night, Chaz reviewed the employee files and photographs of every station-house employee, and every bit of background Hafidha could drag up on them. Sunday, he called Amarilis at lunch her time, and finally managed a five-minute conversation. She mentioned the press conference with relief. "So you'll be home tonight?"

He made a noncommittal noise. "I sure hope so. CNN's still on the story?"

"All over it," she answered. "I saw you sitting off to the side. Are all your colleagues that pretty?"

"I bet your coworkers' girlfriends ask them the same question," he said, to hear her snort: flattered, but unimpressed. Because Amarilis would laugh, he continued, "Never fear. I've been stalking her for over a year, and she has yet

to notice my existence. So I traded up my crush for a better model. With racing stripes."

Beat. Beat. "That blond guy you were sitting next to?"

She got him with coffee in his mouth. He spluttered, scorched his throat swallowing the coffee, and when he was done laughing, said "Ow."

Her voice was still concerned, though, when she said, "Do they make you wear your gun inside the police station?"

"I always wear it in the field," he said. "Sorry. What are you up to today?"

"I have to run. Lunch with my father," she answered, which triggered a whole rush of associative images of her scrambling to get out of his apartment one morning so she could change before a Date With Her Dad. Which, in turn, led him to the night before and a particularly vivid suite of memories.

Sometimes, being an eidetiker was more a distraction than a blessing. He pressed his shin sharply against the leg of the metal desk. "Have fun."

"Be careful," she answered, and ended the call.

*

By lunchtime, nothing had broken. Chaz sat fretfully behind a desk trading blog comments with Hafidha; cramming down cereal, Skor bars, and fried chicken; and keeping nine tenths of his attention on Lau at all times while trying not to appear as if he was doing anything other than killing time on the computer and inappropriately cruising a pretty coworker. Reyes had made a point of removing himself and Worth from the office. Falkner and Todd were conspicuously closeted in the conference room.

And Chaz kept having to restrain himself from dropping his hand to his weapon any time somebody walked toward Lau. He had a headache from slamming that caffeine and Aleve wouldn't touch, and he was managing to feel both bloated and starving simultaneously.

"Lamest superpower on earth," he muttered, as Brady walked by and dropped a king-size mocha java and a stack of chocolate doughnuts on his desk.

"Hey," Brady said. "At least you get one. There's more doughnuts in the office. Todd made a run."

"Thanks, man." Chaz took a long drink of the mocha and sighed. Then he texted Worth to let her know that nothing was happening yet, and by the way, we have doughnuts.

As he anticipated, she and Reyes were back in the office within the hour. A bit later, she walked up, doughnut in hand, and delivered a bag containing a green salad, two pre-sliced apples in plastic bags, a large box of lobster fried rice, and a 2-liter bottle of Coke. "I'll name my firstborn after you," Chaz promised, as she handed him the chopsticks. "I thought I might never see a vegetable again."

"Rule one," she said. "Feed the beta." She leaned a hip on his desk and said, "How's it going?"

"Oh, most of the shift is out on an arson call up in the hills," Chaz said between bites of apple. "Just what San Diego needs. Another brush fire. And I really wish I could just bag on this and go for a hike." A tickle, something--maybe just the practice of belaying, where you always keep your attention on your climbing partner and your hands on the rope--made him keep watching Lau and the space around Lau while he ate. Well, that, and the fact that Lau was hot enough that it was nice to have an excuse to watch her. Which--all telephone teasing aside--was something he probably wasn't going to mention to Amarilis twice if he was smart, unless she brought it up again. Referring back to what he'd told himself Friday morning, and every morning since she'd managed to trip into his arms.

Literally.

He couldn't just ask a girl for a date, apparently. No, she had to fall on him. "But..."

"One way or another, we'll be home tomorrow," Daphne said.

As he was turning to answer her, Chaz's attention snagged on something--there. Maria Gometz hesitated on the other side of the door, checked for no reason, and turned her head over her shoulder. As if someone had called her name. But Chaz hadn't heard anything.

Daphne said, "We'll go climbing--Chaz?"

Chaz was already rising from his chair, leashed by a broken pattern. This time, his hand did land on his sidearm, and his thumb moved automatically to pop the snap.

And where would Gometz's eye have fallen, if she hadn't turned just then?

Once upon a time, before he was a sworn officer of the law, Chaz had done things he couldn't admit to his coworkers now. Because they had been illegal, done under cover of darkness, with a getaway car waiting at the bottom of the cliff or span or building to bundle the jumpers and their equipment away before the cops or the park rangers arrived. The game had been to squeeze out that extra split second of freefall, to be the guy with the lowest pull. They called it beating the elevator, and Chaz had always been the one to bend his luck the farthest.

He'd been able to do it because he knew. He just knew. How fast he was falling; how long it would take him to cover the distance to the deck; how soon the canopy could brake him. Inexorably, perfectly. It happened the same way every time, inevitable as the bounce of a steel ball around a roulette wheel.

It worked just the same way now. Angles and vectors and lines of force, and he'd never been able to make sense of the fact that he just couldn't convert it into helping him fire a pistol accurately. Poor fine motor control. And he flinched or jerked the trigger, and the bullet didn't wind up where he'd meant to put it.

Halfway across the room was a medium-build Caucasian man of less than average height, his cheeks hollowed under sunken eyes. Blue shirt, conservative tie, brown Land's End penny loafers with actual pennies in them.

Chaz hadn't seen him come in.

"Him," he said. The panic button was on the desk; he remembered where. He hit it without looking. "Nikki!"

Lau turned, hair flaring, shirt untucked over her vest, the tails covering the butt of her gun. Not fast enough; the UNSUB closed those last steps, half-slipping out of Chaz's perception until Chaz clamped down, nauseatingly, held the pattern in his mind and locked it there.

"Where?!" Daphne's weapon was in her hands, high-ready, the line of her gaze everywhere except on the man who now reached out and grabbed Lau's hair, spinning her around. She yelled--"Fuck!"--and fetched up against his chest, arms more or less at her sides.

The weapon in the host's left hand was a black-handled combat knife, not a gun. Chaz froze, pistol leveled, as the host pressed it up under Lau's right breast.

Daphne said, "Chaz, where did Lau go?"

"Right there," Chaz said. His head ached with the pressure of holding the host in his sight. Like a thumbnail gouging in above his right eye. His eyes teared. He wondered if you could pop an aneurysm jamming.

Useless fucking power. Useless, when he was the only one who could see the host and his hostage. A knife would go through Kevlar like cutting a cheese wrapper, and Lau wasn't wearing trauma plates. Anything other than a light vest would have shown through her clothes. "Dammit, right there."

Gun leveled, and he was the worst shot in the unit. Gun leveled, and there was Lau, staring right at him with big dark eyes, her mouth half-open, and the host had three-quarters cover behind her and most of his face shoved into the side of her head. Falkner and Todd were in the doorway from the conference room now, Gometz just inside the hallway door. Reyes and Brady were right behind her. Worth on Chaz's left. All of them with weapons at ready, not aimed. How could they, when there was nothing to aim for?

Chaz blinked watering eyes. The gamma had him beat, was slipping out of his vision again. Nobody had a bead but him. *My kingdom for an external manifestation*.

The host was looking right at him. "You can see me?" Quick gasps, his voice neither calm nor level.

Lau was. Calm, and level, and looking right at Chaz. "Take the shot."

Until a savage yank on her hair pulled her head back, the knife point digging in. Chaz couldn't see if the darkness it revealed was blood or the black fabric of the vest, but Lau gasped, bit her lip.

"Bitch, shut up! Or I'll cut your fucking tits off and feed them to your boyfriend over there."

Brady. He meant Brady, by the jerk of his head. Brady, who had paused inside the door, confused, casting about like a bloodhound for a scent.

The host had been watching them all along. And he still hadn't *seen* a thing.

Chaz sucked air in his nose, pushed it out his mouth. A huffing breath, as if for power while climbing. He knew this man's name. He'd looked at close to a hundred and fifty photos and employment files, and all the background information Hafidha could bring. He could remember it if he could just see the page in front of himself. Just remember the image, and the name.

The host was a dispatcher. Third-shift. Both parents still alive, father confined to wheelchair. His father had been a police officer, wounded in the line of duty. The UNSUB's record indicated that he'd been refused admission to the police academy the previous summer, and Chaz--who should have found the link almost offensively obvious--had failed to make the connection before now. Had failed to notice.

The arson call was a decoy. Of course. The host was a *dispatcher*.

Like his victims, he hadn't needed to see the horrors he was inflicting on the responding officers. Because he could hear it. And whatever he could imagine was so much better--so much worse--than reality that it would ruin half the fun if he could see.

"Frank Scott," Chaz said. "Yes. I see you."

*

The knife point pierced Kevlar and Lau felt the hot trickle start. No pain yet--not much. She let warmth radiate from that point of contact, loosening her muscles. She found her balance, though the gamma was pulling her back.

Better. Better than if he had the knife to her throat. Her right hand clutched his right wrist, above the fist knotted in her hair. He had the knife-hand arm around her left arm, and probably thought he was pinning her.

Dismissed again. What a pretty little thing.

The gamma's attention was on Chaz. She felt him tense when Chaz said "I can see you," and understood that nobody else in the room could do so.

Chaz continued, "The response time. It's really terrible, isn't it? You could have done better. If they'd given you half a chance."

Lau felt the host's breathing hitch. She stared at Chaz, as if by directing her attention at him fiercely, she could force the gamma to do the same. Chaz was staring at the gamma, past her, as if she didn't exist. His hair flopped in his eyes. He focused along the length of his firearm, but his face was animated as he spoke.

He said, "If anybody had just really looked at you. They would have seen how you could change things. But these assholes don't see what's right in front of their noses, do they? They don't notice. They deserve what they get. It's criminal how they ignore what's right in front of their eyes."

"Criminal," the gamma--Frank Scott--said. "Yes. *You understand.*"

Lau couldn't quite seem to focus on the host, any more than Brady and Todd, braced waveringly by the door, could. But it didn't matter. She could feel him, feel the shift of his balance, and she knew something about him that Chaz couldn't know, from all the way over there.

The host didn't know how to fight.

"If they just paid attention," Chaz said.

Against Lau's back, the host drew a rasping breath. What Chaz was groping for, he was close to finding. The trigger was under his finger, literally and metaphorically. He had to pull one or the other of them any second now.

Chaz said, "If they cared about you at all. Like your family. Like your dad the cop. Did he drink, Frank? Did he hit you or was it just the degradation, the constant put-downs? It was pretty bad, wasn't it, what he did to you. And you could never be good enough, tough enough for him. You could never be what he was. You could never make him see you, could you? And worse than him, you could never be good enough for your mom. If you were, she might have protected you. But she didn't care what he did to you. She didn't protect you. She just wouldn't *see.* It made you angry, didn't it? All those happy families. All those coddled babies. The little *bastards*."

The conviction in Chaz's voice could have burned her. True, what he was saying. All true. Passionate. *Personal*. Who knew the kid had so much bitterness and venom bottled up inside?

Chaz said, "What did they do to deserve what you never got?"

The host shuddered, jerked forward off-balance. "Chaz, now!" Lau hit the crook of the host's arm with the point of her left elbow, driving his knife-hand wide. Something grazed stinging across her ribs.

#

Chaz couldn't shoot, but he could *hit*. Lau moved, as Chaz had been expecting her to move, and the instant her weight shifted he dropped his gun behind him and charged. Arms extended, pushing for a running leap. Not stylish--that was Brady's job--but Chaz yelled as he jumped, and the host jerked his chin up and staggered to the side, off-balance from Nikki's strike.

Lau was, as usual, three steps ahead. She dropped, right hand tightening on the host's wrist as she rolled his weight over her shoulder and flipped him.

Chaz missed his grab at the host's knife-arm, stumbled, and fell hard against rattling sheet metal that rocked under the impact.

*

Something flew past Lau's head; she ducked, scrabbling cross-body for her sidearm. The host had forty pounds on her and gamma strength and toughness. She lunged up to bend his right arm behind him and bring the Taurus online, and felt the shattering, sickening crunch as he dislocated his own shoulder, twisting, lashing out with the knife. There. He had to be on the ground right there. His wrist slipped in her hand. Right there, dammit, where was the knife?

She felt his weight shift, sidestepped. In the dojo, she'd sparred blindfolded. This was the same except the knife. She felt it graze her thigh, twisted the arm again, heard him grunt.

Aimed at the grunt, and fired. And fired. And when he wrenched at her grasp one more time, fired. The team must be able to see him now, because other weapons spoke, bullets that moved past her, aimed with such care she never felt the wind of their passing.

Gamma. Empty the magazine.

God.

"God."

Hands on her shoulders, cautious, but she jumped anyway. Almost brought the gun around, but more hands caught her wrist, and she realized that somebody had been saying her name over and over for what seemed like hours. Brady. It was Brady and Worth, and Maria, Brady holding her steady, pulling her back from the corpse on the floor, Maria prying the gun from her numb clenched fingers, and Worth pushing her slit shirt aside, looking for the wound.

"Release the firearm, Special Agent," Brady said.

Lau looked very hard at her left hand, and made the fingers uncurl from the butt of the gun so Maria could take it away from her. The slide was locked open, empty. God bless Massad Ayoob and his insistence that law enforcement officers learn to shoot off-handed. As soon as she got back to DC, she was sending him ten dollars and a thank-you card.

"Chaz," Lau said.

"Ow," Chaz said, from behind her.

She would have turned, but Worth said "Hold still, Nikki," in her First Responder Voice, and there was no arguing with that.

"Chaz," she insisted.

"Fine," he said, from the floor behind her. "*Who's got the gamma?*"

"I do." Reyes, grim and quiet. "Though I think it's safe now."

Which was a euphemism for dead. Lau wondered what Frost's autopsy would show, and how many bullets it would turn out to have taken. She shuddered, hard. Brady's hands tightened on her shoulders. She put her fingers over his and gave him a squeeze before she pushed him away, because if she let him keep holding her up she would crack, and Nikki Lau didn't crack.

Nikki Lau was bulletproof.

"You're fine," Worth said. "Barely scratched." She patted Lau's hip and stood. Lau turned, Brady still hovering, and let Worth put an arm around her.

Chaz was under a toppled filing cabinet. Todd and Falkner crouched beside him. But he was awake, and cursing, and it looked like most of the weight was supported on a (now broken) office chair.

Still. Ow.

Falkner looked at Todd, and Todd nodded. "On three," he said. Together, they grasped the cabinet and heaved from the knees, levering it off Chaz's left side and hip.

"Ow, fuck," he said, and curled up as the weight came off him.

Lau winced in sympathy. Worth gave her an anxious glance. "Go," Lau said, and made herself pull her shaking hand off Worth's shoulder.

"Lemme see, Platypus," she said, pushing his shirt up. He pawed at her hands, but she ignored him. "Stoppit. Whiner. You're gonna have a hell of a bruise, but I don't think you cracked anything."

Maria had taken Worth's place at Lau's shoulder. "Platypus?"

"Office nickname," Lau explained. "They eat something like half their own body weight in a day."

Maria stared at her for a second and then snorted. "Oh. I see."

"Okay, you can get up." Worth offered Chaz a hand, and after a moment's consideration, he accepted it. And got to his feet, groaning.

"I told you to take the shot," Lau said.

"Yeah, but I like you." He turned to look ruefully at the filing cabinet. "And I didn't expect you to throw him at me."

Falkner, one hand pressed to the small of her back, said, "You're lucky it was mostly empty."

"If it wasn't unbalanced, it wouldn't have fallen on him," Todd said. But Chaz brushed past him, limping slightly, and leaned around Lau to get a look at the gamma.

His expression silenced everyone in the room. Even Reyes, who seemed to be watching Chaz's face across the body of the dead man with a pained and considering expression. Chaz took a deep breath and rocked back on his heels, arms crossed over his narrow chest, big spider hands hooked over spiky shoulders. Making a breastplate.

"Frank Scott," he said, as if evaluating its flavor and texture. Then he said, under his breath, "You have no kung fu."

*

Ten minutes later, in the next room, Lau watched Worth put her hand out to touch Chaz, and Chaz--who hated to be grabbed--allow it. *Reyes could be wrong*, she thought, but there was the perfume in Chaz's hair, and--

No, whatever this was about, it wasn't about sex.

Chaz said, "Well, since I didn't shoot anybody, I don't have any paperwork. Daphs, let's find a wall. I need to do something with this adrenaline."

Worth opened her mouth as if to protest, but his expression silenced her. She nodded and said, "Sol, you want to come with us? You keep saying you're gonna--"

"I have a date," Todd answered, fishing his cell out of his pocket. "Late. After Liz gets off work." He shrugged. "Not being dead permitting."

Maria nodded, with a sidelong glance at Lau. She extended Lau's empty firearm, the slide locked open. Lau took it, exchanged the magazine, and re-holstered the weapon, as Maria said, "O.K. Corral. Bullets flying everywhere, and none of 'em hit you. You're Wyatt Earp."

"Actually," says Chaz, "that gunfight wasn't at the OK Corral. It was a block away--"

"On Fremont Street," Brady finished, with an eyeroll. He punched Chaz in the uninjured arm, and Chaz grinned. "Shut up, kid."

Lau held up her arms, crossed at wrists as if blocking something, hoping her hands weren't shaking visibly. "I am not. See these? Bullets and bracelets. Wonder Woman. Bulletproof."

They stared. Reyes, in his Do Not Mess With Me, I Am Your Father voice, said, "Lau, from here on, you take no risks. None. You don't drive over fifty-five, you look both ways before you cross the street and look again after that, you don't jump off the high dive, you don't eat shellfish, you don't run in heels. First, because I'm getting old and my heart won't take it. Second, because you just used up every last bit of luck you were allotted for your lifetime. All of it. Don't try it again.

"And another thing." He reached out and patted her arm. "Good work, kid."

It was Brady who turned, surveying the room they had left behind through the glass wall and the blinds. He took a deep quelling breath and let it out again. "Jesus. They're gonna need some spackle."

*

"Good," Chaz said, light tension on the belay rope tugging him gently. Worth was getting better: less weight on the rope every time. Which he was glad of, really. He'd been happy to just send a 5.7 or two and then belay his partner, though he'd had to get one of the other climbers to bring him a wrench to tighten one of the holds halfway up on the second climb.

Whatever he'd told the team, his ribs were killing him. But it had been worth it to come out to the climbing gym and see the desk girl's eyes get big when she looked away from the TV and recognized them. And he'd remembered to bring a padlock, so they could stow their firearms in a locker. "Now stand up on it."

Daphne laughed and yelled down, "Don't make me laugh," then blew her bangs out of her eyes. Her bangs were always in her eyes, and Chaz wondered why she didn't grow them out. From the ground, belaying, the rope moving jerkily through his hands--you never took your hands off the rope, and you never took your attention off your partner--he could see her thigh and calf tense, the cut line in her forearm as the hand she'd jammed into the crack clenched. She had just the edge of her toe on a tiny foothold shaped like an inverted star.

She levered herself out of a deep crouch, and rose.

"Shit," she said, on tiptoe, straining. Her fingertips left chalk smudges at the lip of the hold, but she couldn't get around it. She looked good up there, though, confident rather than hesitant, and that was new. Not afraid of falling. She said, "Three inches too short."

"Nah." He took in slack. "It's okay to be short. Your center of gravity stays closer to the pitch."

"But I can't reach."

He checked her balance, checked his grip on the rope, and said "Jump."

"Jump?"

"Jump off that foothold and grab the handhold. It's called dyno. You just need the confidence."

"What if I fall?" Her head twisted as she measured the distance, tried to guess what the top of that handhold might bring. Was it smooth? Was there a good dip to jam your fingers in?

"That's why you have me, and a rope."

"Platypus--"

"You have a great big toehold there. Jump! Or I'll tell Brady you sissied."

"Drat you," she answered. She crouched a little, coiling as much as she could without losing her balance. "On belay?" Gathering her courage.

"Belay is on," he said. An affirmation that he was there, and that he had her.

"Climbing," she said.

He finished the ritual: "Climb away," and she jumped, hard, all that kick for a meagre four-inch hop.

Her fingertips scrabbled. She swung on that one extended arm until her other hand came up and she flexed her biceps and dragged herself up the wall inch by inch until one smearing foot hit a nice big ledge and she laughed and whooped and hugged close to the wall to rest.

It was enough.

"Good job, Harpy." Chaz grinned, and made sure he'd taken in all the slack she just made.

*

Lau thought Brady would hover all the way back to DC, but he'd sat up until dawn with her and Maria drinking coffee and telling war stories, so he didn't have much fight left in him when they climbed into the plane before first light. "Go lie down," Lau ordered, as they walked past Chaz, who lifted his head out of his heavily stickerized iBook long enough to nod to both.

Brady opened his mouth, looked at her, looked at the row of chairs she pointed to imperiously, and started unknotting his tie. For herself, she sat down in the first row, by the window, and thought about how soon she would be in DC and her own bed. Flying into the sunrise.

She must have said the words out loud, because as Todd dropped into the chair beside her he said, "Beats riding into the sunset, Wyatt."

"As long as it's not 'Shane! Come back, Shane!'" she answered. She leaned her head against the rest and turned her face to the window. "Did you just get back from your date?"

"Restaurant people stay up late," he said noncommittally. "It's the lifestyle."

His hair--what he had of it--was damp at the back, and he wasn't wearing the same shirt he'd been wearing the day before. As she wrinkled her nose at him, Reyes appeared in the hatchway carrying his own garment bag--and Todd's. "Brought this from the hotel," he said, and stumped past to the lockers at the front.

Lau raised an eyebrow. Todd shrugged. "We talked about Van Morrison. And Christy Moore. Then Falkner called to tell me we were wheels up in an hour, and--I didn't have time to make it back to the hotel."

"I seem to recall that conversation is not prohibitive of other activities," Lau said.

"Gentlemen don't drop hints."

"Or gloat."

"Most definitely not," he agreed comfortably, leaning his shoulder against hers as if by accident. If it had been Brady, she might have believed it, but Todd was a slender, fine-boned man. She leaned back, just a little, to let him know she'd noticed the gesture and appreciated its facade of happenstance.

"Are you going to see her again?"

He looked down at his hands. "She has my email. And my phone."

"San Diego's a long way from home."

He leaned harder for a second. His shoulders rose and fell and he said, just for her, "So where's home again, anyway?"

*

Amarilis hadn't called to say she was coming over, and when Chaz opened the door, he knew she hadn't come to surprise him. She wore a sweatshirt and the jeans he had been meaning to tell her looked good on her, and her

hair was pinned up in a clip, showing the long smooth line of her neck. Everything about her said he wasn't supposed to kiss her, so he stood aside, wincing with the motion, and let Amarilis into the cramped little apartment.

"Chaz," she said, as he shut the door, "I'm sorry."

"It's really just a bruise--"

"No. I'm sorry I'm not--I can't do this." She looked away, turned toward the window, and for a moment her face was overlaid with a vivid eidetic flash of Lau as Todd murmured to her on the plane.

Her voice came out too high, as if her throat had tightened around it. "I can't keep doing this, because I like you too much, and if I like you any more, I won't be able to live with what you do."

Well, of course. Everybody leaves. It's only a matter of when.

Better now than a year from now, maybe. Better now than after he'd come to put some weight on the relationship. He couldn't file a protest--begging never helps. But at least he could try not to let her leave thinking he was something he wasn't.

"I'm one of the good guys," he said. "For real."

Her mouth worked. Well, at least she wasn't finding it easy, though--perversely--he wanted to make it easier for her, since it was inevitable now. She couldn't look at him. She said, as if to an empty room, "No, it's not that part. It's the part where if we're together, I'm going to feel my hands go cold every time the phone rings."

And he said, "Oh."

Now she looked at his face: that had been the hard part. "It was on the news."

As if being on the news were the worst thing in the world. He thought about it, and thought about knowing that if something happened, chances were that's where your first inkling would come from.

He touched her arm. Her eyes closed, as if in pain. She turned her face away and knotted her fists on the windowledge. He couldn't make her braver, and anyway nobody should have to be brave enough for what he did. That

Falkner had Benjamin and Worth had Tricia seemed to him a kind of minor miracle. And too much to hope for, if he was honest with himself.

Which, sometimes, he had to be.

He let his fingers slide from her sleeve and stepped back. "I'm not mad," he said. Then, because he had to be better than baseline human beings, he swallowed hard and said, "If you ever need anything--and I mean *anything*--you can call. Okay? Don't answer now. Just know it's there if you need it."

She licked her lips. She started to say *no*. But whatever was on his face when she met his eyes, she stopped and thought and nodded.

"Okay." She pulled her hands from the windowledge. It looked like it hurt, letting go. "Thank you for not making this awful, Chaz."

Says who? But he had to be better than saying that, also, so instead he just walked her to the door.

She let him kiss her goodbye.

Commentary

[editor's: this is not in the reading order, but is linked in "Overkill"]

From the* Shadow Unit *season one boxed set, DVD commentary track on "Overkill" (01.07)

CAMRYN KAUFMANN: For this shot I actually had to learn to climb, sort of.

ROBERT X. AGUILERA: Sort of is a generous way of putting it--

CAM: Shutup. And I'm so afraid of heights. And I'm stuck up there twenty-five feet off the floor about to pee myself I'm so scared, and I'm trying to cover it up, and the cameras are rolling, and Beto hollers the line about "Now stand up on it!"

And I lose it. I scream, "Bring your face over here and I'll stand on THAT, you effing orangutang!" Except, you know. I didn't say "effing." The crew goes nuts, whooping and cheering. Beto screams, I mean, *screams* with laughter, because, you know, release of tension.

And I get this burst of adrenaline that's just "WHOA!" and I jump and totally stick the hold. Perfect! Except we can't use it. BECAUSE I SAID THE F WORD.

After that I couldn't stop laughing long enough to climb, so we had to patch in my double after all. And she went up there like the Itsy Bitsy Spider.

BETO: Oh yeah, and the fact that I was in the shot, supposedly belaying you, and I laughed so hard I sat down on the pad had *nothing* to do with wasting the take--

CAM: Dude. It's all about me. You should know that by now.

Valentine

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., December 11, 2007

"Hafs?"

"One sec. Lemme hit save." There was no visible motion of hands, just a flick of Hafidha's eyes, before she spun her chair, sending braids flying. She frowned up at Daphne through cat's-eye glasses. "Speak and be recognized."

Daphne twisted her hands, glanced over her shoulder, and furtively nudged the office door shut with her heel, not caring that Hafidha's eyebrows rose. "Did we do a bad thing?"

"Chaz? Sunday night?"

"You know it."

Hafidha pointed toward a chair. Daphne collapsed in it with a thump, as if the Evil Scientist's death ray had made her suddenly boneless. "He's so not himself. I just--"

But Hafidha interrupted with a held-up hand, so Daphne bit her lip on whatever she had been about to say. Hafidha said, "The point of the exercise was to prove to the kid that he can in fact get laid any time he wants to."

"Yeah, but I didn't expect him to..."

"Shag some hottie whose name he never got up against a nightclub wall and be back in his seat ten minutes later? With your sour apple martini and my cosmopolitan in hand?"

Hearing Hafidha say it made Daphne glad she was sitting down. It wasn't... jealousy, exactly. Or that she was shocked. She'd taken a few chances herself, when she was Chaz's age. But it was a paradigm shift, as if the guy she knew had split open, and somebody else had stepped out of the smoking skin. "I feel like we pushed him. I don't want him... out of control. He's a *good kid*."

Hafidha's eyes flicked to the door. She lowered her voice. "He's a 25-year-old man with a broken heart, who also happens to have a terminal illness and a job we will charitably call high-stress."

"Right," Daphne said, and closed her eyes. "I was buying the mask, wasn't I?"

Hafs reached out, patted her knee, and turned away to rummage in a desk drawer. "He's still Chaz. It's just that Chaz isn't just the guy who always remembers to ask if anybody else wants coffee when he gets up. You know. He also leaps tall buildings in a single bound, parachutes from random objects, drafts off semis on a skateboard, climbs without a rope--"

"Not when I'm there he doesn't," Daphne said grimly. "But.. yeah. You're right."

"Honey, I *am.*"

"The only problem is now rather than convincing him he's good enough to get the girl, we've convinced him that he's only good enough to fuck."

Hafidha did something in the drawer that Daphne didn't quite see. And then she turned back, hands folded in her lap, and said, "Daphs--" And then she stopped, and shook her head, and started over. "There's a girl out there for him. Probably a half-dozen, if they have any sense at all. He'll sort it out." She reached out and tapped Daphne between the eyebrows. "Now go blow your nose and get a cup of coffee."

"Hey! I wasn't crying." But Hafidha grinned, and Daphne grinned back--a little forced, not too terrible, and headed for the bathroom anyway.

When she got there, she glanced into the mirror and burst out laughing.

There was a gold star stuck right between her eyes.

The Frogs

Note: this file is not linked on the reading order, but is available via a hidden hyperlink at the end of Valentine.

SHADOW UNIT

"The Frogs"

TEASER

1. SFX: the strangely mechanical cheeping of tree frogs. Over those, the soft thud of careless footsteps on soft ground.

FADE IN -- EXT HAFIDHA'S PARENT'S HOUSE - NIGHT:

A baroque, overgrown structure on Maui: a ramshackle and quirky house that is partially built up into the branches of an enormous banyan tree. A lanky figure cuts across the yard, silhouetted by foundation lights. It's CHAZ VILLETTE. He has a beach towel in one hand. He wears flip-flops, swim trunks, and an unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt, and his hair is stuck in salty spirals. He stops to watch a thumbnail-sized frog hop along a broad tropical leaf, and shakes his head in rueful admiration. That tiny animal is the source of all the noise.

NOTE TO SELF: NEVER HOVER OVER THIS !!!

As he lifts his head, he hesitates. He hears voices through the open window, from the darkened house.

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
I'm just saying it's creepy. (BEAT) You don't think it's a coincidence, do you?

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
What, that she brought him home?

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
No, that--well, look--

EMBARRASSMENT MORBID CURIOSITY GUILT

VILLETTE--looking stricken, but unable to stop himself--tiptoes closer to the house to better eavesdrop.

MRS. HAFIDHA (cont'd) (O.C.)
If he's got the same issues Hafs has, maybe he has some of the same... gifts.

(cont)

← JUDGE CRATER. HIS MARK AGAIN!!!

1. CONTINUED 1.

OH SHIT FACE

OFF VILLETTE, as he reacts.

CUT TO:

2. INT -- HAFIDHA'S PARENT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

SFX: those damned frogs, still sawing away.

VILLETTE, his towel forgotten in his hand, ascends a flight of crooked stairs. At the top, he pauses outside a closed door, and taps lightly on it with his knuckles.

CARRYING SHOES — CHAZ IS SNEAKING !

VILLETTE
Hafidha?

HAFIDHA (O.C., muffled through door)
It's 1 am. This had better be Armageddon. Or you'd better be Shemar Moore in a tux.

VILLETTE
Just let me in, okay?

SFX: Creak of bedsprings, footsteps, sound of a lock.

TRACK VILLETTE IN TO:

3. INT -- HAFIDHA'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM -- NIGHT

SFX: the frogs chirping in the background

VILLETTE steps inside the darkened bedroom, where we FIND HAFIDHA. VILLETTE notices that HAFIDHA has a Glock in her left hand, concealed against her thigh.

(cont)

3. CONTINUED 3.

VILETTE
Easy there, 007.

HAFIDHA
MY feet are cold. I'm going back to bed.

HAFIDHA climbs back into bed, replacing the weapon in her nightstand drawer, while VILLETTE shuts and locks the bedroom door. HAFIDHA turns on the light on the night stand.

HMM WHERE'S TOWEL IS?

VILLETTE
It's about your parents.

HAFIDHA
Oh, god, are they at it again? I'm sorry. They're like a couple of stoats. You just learn to stomp around the house so they hear you coming--

VILLETTE
Um, no, not that. It's... Hafs, you're adopted?

HAFIDHA
You noticed Mom and Dad are a little melanin-deprived? Yeah. It was fun growing up in the Seventies, lemme tell you--

HAFIDHA notices that VILLETTE is not really listening. Rather, he's standing with his back to the door, wringing his hands.

MAYBE HAIR-THING INSTEAD?

HAFIDHA
Out with it, Platypus.

(cont)

3. CONTINUED (2) 3.

VILLETTE glances around nervously, clears his throat, raises both hands like puppet heads to indicate two people talking back and forth, and begins to recite in flat tones. As he does, bring in MR. & MRS. HAFIDHA's voices over VILLETTE's.

VILLETTE as MRS. HAFIDHA
I'm just saying it's creepy. (BEAT) You don't think it's a coincidence, do you?

VILLETTE as MR. HAFIDHA
What, that she brought him home?

VILLETTE as MRS. HAFIDHA
No, that--well, look--If he's got the same issues Hafs has, maybe he has some of the same... gifts.

CROSSFADE TO:

SFX: the abominable frogs, louder

4. -- EXT HAFIDHA'S PARENT'S HOUSE - NIGHT, EARLIER:

VILLETTE, still listening.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
You going to ask him?

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
That would be rude.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
So you're just speculating.

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
Well, sort of. But he mentioned something about a foster mom over lunch--

(cont)

4. CONTINUED 4.

WINCE

OFF VILLETTE'S reaction.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
I didn't hear that.

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
You were in the other room.

2 TAKES ACCIDENTAL FROG KISSES

A frog hops onto a twig at eye level. VILLETTE frowns at it.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
So he's adopted too?

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
I dunno. Maybe. It just seems funny that they would wind up... pushed together like that. Recruited into the same department of the same agency.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
You don't trust him?

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
I trust him fine. Hafs is a good judge of people. It just seems like a funny coincidence.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
Or not a coincidence at all.

MRS. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
Right.

(cont)

FROG WRANGLER
GINA 310-869-[redacted]

KISS FROG, GET PRINCE??

4. CONTINUED (2) 4.

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
So, what, you're implying it's some kind of... federal government supersoldier matchmaker program? They're expected to pair off, and then the babies will be taken away and given to carefully selected hippy radicals to raise?

OFF VILLETTE'S reaction. — AMAZING FROG-BOY FACE

MR. HAFIDHA (O.C.)
Well, when you put it that way--

CROSSFADE TO:

5. INT -- HAFIDHA'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Fade back into current-time, with VILLETTE flatly reciting--

VILLETTE as MRS. HAFIDHA
Yeah. (BEAT) Still. It is a funny coincidence.

VILLETTE as MR. HAFIDHA
Yeah. (BEAT) And Lee Harvey Oswald was a really good shot.

VILLETTE slowly lowers his hands, while HAFIDHA stares at him.

HAFIDHA
You don't suppose Reyes...

VILLETTE
(1...2...3...) ...nah.

(cont)

5. CONTINUED 5.

HAFIDHA
No, I didn't think so, either.
Definitely not.

They stare at each other, while (SFX) the frogs continue their maddening chirping.

HAFIDHA (cont'd)
Unless...

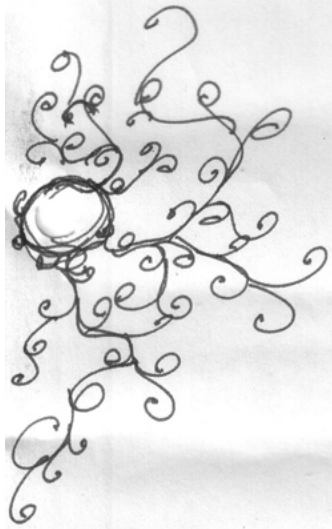
VILLETTE:
...nah. Hey. Are you hungry?

OFF HAFIDHA, deciding to smile

SMASH CUT TO:

MAIN TITLES

END OF TEASER

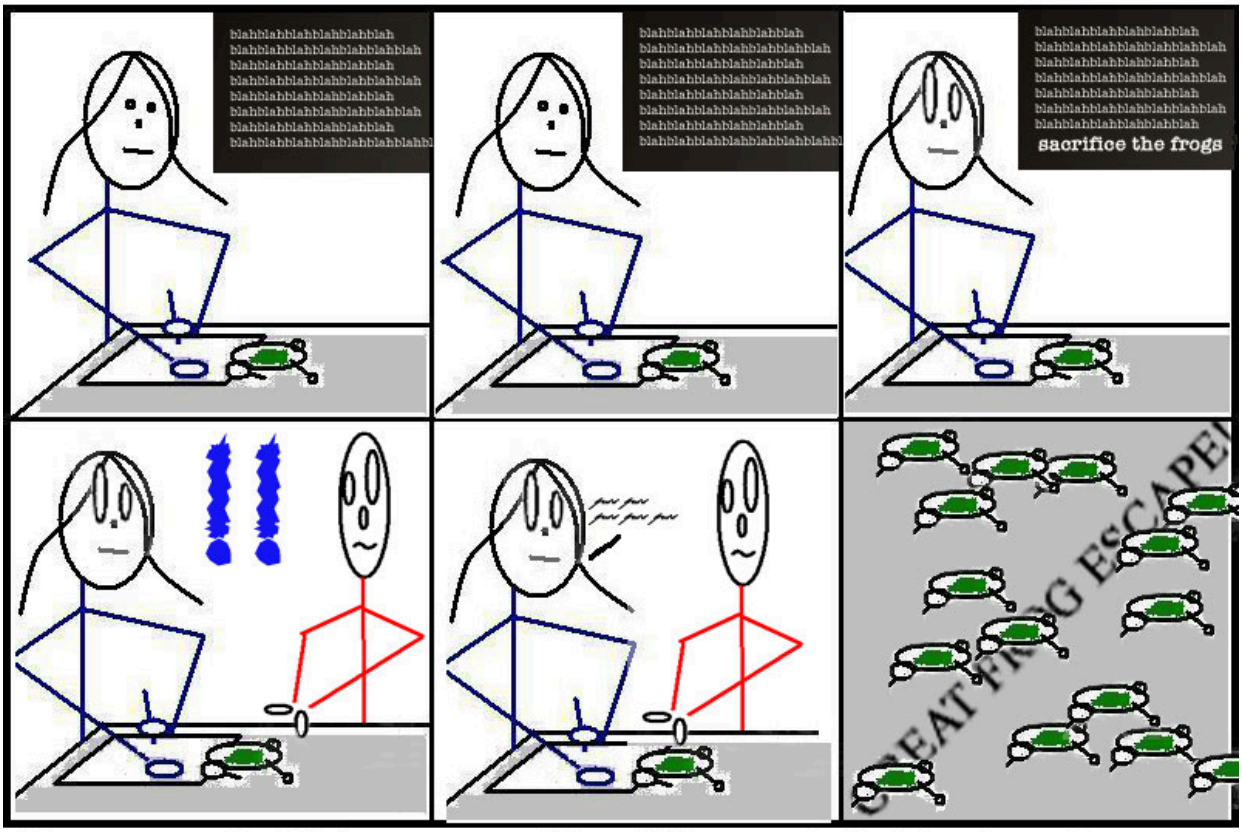


Li’l Nikki: the web’s worst comic

Note: this file is not linked on the reading order, but is available at the end of the last page (7) of Frogs.

Li'l Nikki: the web's worst comic

5th period: Introduction to Biology



Of course, Mrs. Cardiff always suspected that Nikki Lau was behind the release of forty-two bullfrogs, three gerbils, and a pair of red-eared sliders, but nothing was ever proved, and Benjy Hoffman (age 11) could never be made to roll on his accomplices. Benjy later became a PETA activist, and still sends Nikki recycled holiday cards. The current whereabouts of Mrs. Cardiff are unknown.

Pavement

Somewhere in the internet, November, 2007
Begin Transcript:

*[01:13] ***airbarian has entered the chat*
[01:13] airbarian: You guys will never believe what I just saw on the news.
[01:13] bomber756: Apocalypse. Armageddon.
[01:13] ChairLegg: O.J. Simpson found the real killers.
[01:13] Qeronimo: Shrub declared martial law.
[01:13] ChairLegg: LOL
[01:13] ChairLegg: The end of pizza delivery as we know it.
[01:14] airbarian: Charles Travis fucking Villette.
[01:14] Qeronimo: ...
[01:14] ChairLegg: Chaz? Finally got himself killed?
[01:14] Qeronimo: Ouch.
[01:15] bomber756: What, he didn't make a crater years ago? He fell off the face of the planet--what, 2004? 2005?
[01:15] bomber756: I figured the body just hadn't turned up yet.
[01:16] Qeronimo: *checks the splat file for an obit*
[01:16] airbarian: Waste of keystrokes. Alive and well.
[01:16] airbarian: Get this.
[01:16] airbarian: He's a *Fed.*
[01:17] Qeronimo: ...!!!
[01:17] bomber756: You shit me.
[01:17] ChairLegg: That cannot have been Chaz.
[01:18] airbarian: Are there two people on the planet who look like Screamer?
[01:18] airbarian: I think not.
[01:18] Qeronimo: ...
[01:18] bomber756: You keep typing that ellipsis. I do not think it means what you think it means.
[01:18] Qeronimo: 0.o o.0
[01:18] bomber756: ...better.
[01:18] ChairLegg: By "Fed" you mean?
[01:19] airbarian: He was wearing a blue windbreaker that said F.B.I.

across the shoulders, what do you think I mean?
[01:19] airbarian: And before you ask, yes, no shit.
[01:19] ChairLegg: ...shit.
[01:19] ChairLegg: We could have been... so very busted.
[01:19] airbarian: The words have not been invented to express how busted we could have been.
[01:19] Qeronimo: Well, shit. I figured that motherfucker would be a hole in the pavement by now.
[01:19] Qeronimo: He was one crazy asshole.
[01:21] ChairLegg: Bombs? You still there?
[01:22] bomber756: Don't mind me, man.
[01:22] bomber756: I'm just meditating on the nature of the universe, and the truth of the koan that God is an iron.

End Transcript:

Faith

Silver Spring, MD, December 18, 2007

Light still showed under Rebekah's bedroom door. Esther Falkner tapped the white-painted wood with a fingernail; Rebekah might have fallen asleep with the light on.

Two seconds, before her daughter called, "Come in."

Rebekah perched cross-legged on the end of her bed. Her laptop sat, open but unregarded, on the duvet beside her; her sketchbook lay near it, closed. She had a paperback in her hands, and she worried the corner of one page, folding it, smoothing it, folding it again. Esther recognized one of the Philip Pullman books.

"You okay, kid?" Yes, it was a stupid question. It always was, but it was still the one you asked.

Rebekah nodded without looking up.

If it were one of the team, she'd say, "You look it." But the egos of teenaged girls were a permeable membrane, particularly vulnerable to sarcasm. Esther sat on the edge of the bed, her hands in her lap. It was like the waiting part of any interview, except for the part where she hurt for the subject.

"I don't...think I believe in God," Rebekah said.

The golden age of teen atheism was fifteen, but Rebekah was always ahead of the curve. "Why not?"

Rebekah looked at her sideways. "You're not mad?"

"It's between you and God, kid. I'm just the mother."

The result was a tight little smile and a tear leaking past Rebekah's lashes. "There's just so much...*crap* in the world. Sorry, Mom."

"I still know more bad words than you. Don't worry about that now."

Rebekah shook her head. Esther waited, counting seconds by habit. Finally Rebekah said, "God's supposed to love us and judge us and be fair. But it's

not fair. And if God loved us, he wouldn't do these things to us. So either God hates us or he doesn't exist."

I'm glad you came down on the side of "doesn't exist." She'd seen what could happen when kids believed God didn't love them. Esther searched for the right tone of voice: not too light, a little sad, earnest. So much easier to do when the subject wasn't one's daughter. "You couldn't have waited to have a spiritual crisis until there was a rabbi in the room?"

Rebekah looked up and gave her something more like a smile.

Hard questions deserved hard answers. Another thing she'd brought home from the job. "I think... I think another name for God is 'the world.' I know the world is too complicated to explain in a sentence. It doesn't always seem to make sense, or be fair. Sometimes that's because I don't know enough. And never will. But I believe the world is good. I believe if I pay attention and do right, it gets better for everyone. And when I do that, I feel stronger and happier, and I think maybe that's the world's love."

Rebekah sniffed hard and wiped her face with the heel of her hand. Since she was very small, she'd done it that way, never with her fingers. "But the stuff you see at work is *horrible*."

You didn't lie to your kids. Rebekah knew what her mom did for a living, at least in the broad strokes. And any kid with internet access could read true crime stories. "Yeah."

"So how can you believe God--the world--is good?"

Esther laced her fingers tight in her lap. Killing in the name of God. Killing for love. Torture, terror, things that made Medieval stories of demonic possession look like a schoolyard fistfight. The *thing*, the anomaly, that made every base impulse of humanity worse. *Oh, good question, kid*.

No darkness fell without a balance of light. The victims who'd drawn on impossible strength and courage to hang on in the face of impossible evil. The hosts they'd seen who struggled against the devil on their shoulders. Police officers, firefighters, medical personnel who never lost hope, or lost it and went on anyway.

And the team. Worth, who'd seen the dark and instead of turning away, came to find and join the people who fought it. Brady, who denied his own

vulnerability to be a shield for others. Todd, who'd transformed curiosity into selfless courage. Lau, who would lie to put out a fire but never to start one. Chaz, who rose from his own childhood ashes to pass along the help he'd never gotten. Hafidha, for whom knowledge was power and power multiplied when shared. Reyes, who knew better than anyone how deep the darkness was and how important it was to keep lighting matches, even if they burned you before they guttered out.

She untwined her fingers and lifted a hand to brush Rebekah's hair back from her cheek. Rebekah leaned into the touch. Esther put her arm around her daughter's strong shoulders. "Because every day, I see that, too. That the world is good. So I believe in it."

Rebekah put her head on Esther's shoulder. It wasn't more than she could carry.

The It

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. January 2008

Daphne Worth watched from the corner of her eye as Todd stood up from his desk behind Chaz's, lunchtime Tupperware and a pair of lacquered chopsticks balanced on his maimed left hand. He had the knack of holding it so it looked like the missing fingers were just folded under, part of the self-invisibilizing that formed such a complex interaction with his bibliography of tall tales. He walked toward the kitchenette, and as he passed, she caught a strong aroma of garlic, fish oil, chili pepper, vinegar, fermentation, and chlorophyll.

Sotto voce, she murmured to Chaz, "What was it this time?"

He shook his head, eyes on the monitor, too-long fingers moving awkwardly over the keys. "Dunno. Looked like an embryo."

He didn't seem to be kidding. "Gah," Daphne said. "Another year of his lunches and I may go vegetarian."

"Any creature whose back faces heaven," Chaz muttered.

"He said that?"

"Claimed it was a quote from the Cantonese."

Worth considered the implications. "How many creatures does that leave off the menu?"

This time Chaz glanced over at her, and the eyebrow went up. "You could ask him. But he might tell you."

"Or I might get an entirely unrelated story about how he spent his sixteenth birthday under Russian occupation." She shot a quick, guilty glance at the kitchenette. The water was running, and Falkner's and Reyes' doors were both shut. Brady was on the phone across the aisle, Lau nowhere to be seen. "You ever wonder?"

"All the time. About what in particular?"

"The *It*. Todd. Frost."

"Oh, if there's a subclinical stage? Which has developed in Todd as the ability to claim to have been in three places at once?" Chaz stopped typing and snagged a peanut butter cracker out of its wrapper. "He doesn't manifest any of the symptomatology."

"Yeah." She sighed and pushed her bangs behind her ear. "I'd like to see a brain scan."

"Good luck getting one." This time, it was Chaz craning his neck guiltily. "I wonder if Frost--"

"Duke would tell you he was immune to magnetic resonance imaging, due to a steel plate in his skull, resulting in male pattern baldness." She almost timed it right, but through a heroic effort, Chaz kept the majority of the cracker in his mouth.

He washed it down with a slurp of one of his orange-carrot-ginger juice cocktails and shot her a look dense with reproach. "It's hard enough keeping crumbs out of my keyboard without your help. Still, if we could get him to submit--I dunno. If there is a third stage, either preliminary or something new, do you think it would show up?"

"Jammers do."

"Duke's not a jammer."

"No," Daphne said. "He's just... weirdly lucky. Weirdly unlucky. I was just wondering if it would tell us something about how the Anomaly is evolving."

"If it were evolving."

"Right," Daphne said, and swiveled her chair to her desk as Todd came out of the kitchenette, drying his hands. "Which it ain't."

Frostbite

Paine Lake, MN, January, 2008

"...I know how to use a tranq gun."

Solomon Todd had been expecting the blank look, the disbelieving eyebrow. So he'd been ready with an explanation that wasn't, really.

"Kenya," he'd said. "1977."

And Nikki Lau had blinked at him, bitten her lower lip, and slowly nodded. "Kenya."

"1977."

"Right," she'd said, and sucked her teeth in the most unladylike manner possible, "So how much sedative do you figure it takes to bring down a gamma?"

*

And that was how Solomon Todd came to be freezing his balls off at sunrise, in Minnesota, in January, aboard an antique, doorless, bubble-headed game management helicopter while the rotors ground laboriously up to speed. Who, what, when, where, and why: the whole shooting match.

Five red-feathered syringes rested ready in a case between his legs, one empty space beside them. The .50 cal CO2 rifle was clipped beside the chair. "You know," he said, "I devoted a tour in 'Nam to not being a door gunner."

"And yet here you are volunteering." His partner on this venture, Special Agent Nikki Lau, looked different with her hair slicked back under the helmet, her eyes puffy from early rising. Older, sterner. Still pretty. She perched on the seat beside him, on-edge as a bird dog, and fussed the headset microphone and said, "Chaz is sure he's on the ice?"

Todd imitated her gesture, sliding the microphone to the edge of his mouth so it would pick up words rather than heavy breathing. Just like old times. "Chaz called me up three in the morning his time, fevered off his ass with flu, to make damned sure we looked on the ice. Chaz is sure."

She nodded without looking at him. He'd be surprised if her eyes left the window until the chopper set down again. "Ready?" she asked.

Sunrise glided broken rays between the January trees, casting endless blue ice-shadows across the lake. "Daylight," he answered. "Let's do this thing."

Lau touched her microphone unconsciously, and stuffed her hand back into her armpit. "Take us up," she said.

The chopper tipped and lifted.

Light, shadow. Ice fishermen's huts. The frozen surface of Paine Lake, the weary flatness of the Minnesota horizon in winter. And then a moving shadow, black rather than blue, head down across that flatness as if pushing into a brutal headwind. Todd tracked him through the telescopic sight on the CO2 rifle. Useless for sniping--the gun wasn't powerful enough. But he'd duct-taped it on anyway, so he didn't have to juggle the weapon and a pair of field glasses like the ones Lau had nailed to her nose. He glanced sideways and caught her adjusting them with an ungloved right hand, fingers paling where they touched icy metal.

"No obvious weapons," Todd said. Knowing Lau would know that left a lot of territory uncovered. Knowing the host could have a concealed handgun. Knowing Lau would remember the unscathed bodies stacked in the cabin, tucked neatly--gently--under newsprint pulled up to their chins.

She said, "He doesn't need a gun."

"Sure it's the host?"

"There's not supposed to be anyone else on the ice."

He didn't answer, and after a beat, she said, "Right," her voice clear and level in his ear despite the thunder of the rotors. "Let's go violate the Constitution, Duke."

He wished he thought it was funny. Even the ridiculous nickname couldn't cheer him up.

The chopper swung wide, kicking up crystal curtains of ice and snow. Through the scope, Todd saw the host lift his head, shading his eyes with hands bulky in two or three layered pairs of mittens.

Lau must have seen it too, because she drew a breath. "He was just cold."

Todd said, "Get us lower."

Lau spoke to the pilot, and as he came around again, Todd braced and leveled the rifle, cold wind stinging across his thighs and the backs of his hands. He would have bet a vintage Incredible String Band album that Marlon Perkins got paid a heck of a lot more than he did. "Lower. Lower. This is not going to work."

"Duke," Lau said, in the kind of low warning voice that tells you your passenger has just spotted an oncoming semi.

Inevitably, the host reached into his coat. Commit or pull back? Todd paced his breathing. "Closer," he said. The trigger lay searing cold against his finger. Despite fingerless gloves, he wondered how many shots he had before his hands froze enough so he wouldn't be able to feel the trigger pull.

Lau relayed, and the pilot obeyed. And Todd sighted, took a soft breath, let it out, found the pause before the next one began--and let his finger move against the trigger. *Phut*, the gun said, and he scrambled to eject the used CO2 canister and slap in another dart, because the host had only clapped a hand to his neck and then started groping under his parka again.

The rifle whuffed again; the host scrabbled a handgun free. Lau made a noise in her throat like a hunting dog straining the leash. "Where'd he get that?"

"Victim?" Todd asked. It didn't matter. He couldn't talk and shoot. One more dart, and the host fought his weapon up through wind-whipped snow. "This could kill him,"

"Bring it down," Lau said, as the host squeezed a wild shot somewhere in the direction of the chopper.

"Special Agent--"

The pilot's protest didn't survive her second order. "Way down. Pretend we're doing an evac."

The pilot's helmeted head bobbed, decision made. "All right then."

A vet, probably, because his flying suddenly got a whole lot less conservative. Todd slid a fourth dart into his rifle just in case, flinching

back as the hard slap of another handgun shot rose over the chopper roar, penetrating his noise-damping headphones.

They came in low and he hunkered into his ballistic vest, trying to protect his throat. No use at all--

The shift of air behind him was his only warning that Lau had just done something mind-bogglingly dumb. He turned in time to witness her helmet and headset hitting the deck as she crouched, hands white-knuckled on the metal edge of the opening. She swung her feet down as he struggled one-handed with his harness release. "Nikki!" He lunged across the cabin as her slim form vanished over the door jamb, and got there in time to see her swing from the chopper's runner and thud feet-first, smack in the middle of the host's chest.

The host splatted against the frozen lake and skidded several feet, sliding out from under her as she rolled to come up on all fours. Her skinned palms left pink on the snow. She must have ditched her remaining mitten with the helmet. The host scrambled away on feet and hands, and Lau coiled to go after him.

"Get this thing on the ground!" Todd snapped, and yanked his helmet off. The chopper lurched down, far enough away that Lau wasn't under the rotors, and bumped hard. It hadn't really settled when Todd piled out, running flat-out with rifle upraised like a club. Under his boots, snow squeaked cold.

Nikki knelt on the host's back, his left arm bent up between his shoulders, but he still made fishy, swimming progress across the ice. He twisted; she rode him like a bronc buster determined to make eight seconds, groping for her cuffs with her free, bare left hand.

Todd was never stopping in time on the ice. He dropped the dart rifle aside like a major-league batter and just dove across the host's free arm, groping for a hold.

Starvation-stink of acetone. Yes, this was the host. The gamma, incredibly, fought him. Got a hand on the ice and pushed, and neither Todd nor Lau had the weight to keep him down. Todd's hands stung with cold, numb chill creeping up his wrists, and the hand he had a decent grip with was the weaker left one. Nikki's shoulder banged Todd, hard, his lower lip and nose

mashed bloody, but he locked fingers he couldn't feel on the host's wrist, got his right hand into it, braced both knees, and hauled. The gamma was strong enough to resist him--but the host's shoulder and elbow were not. His trigger finger poked through a ragged slit in the palm of the mitten. Something snapped sharply as the arm came back and around.

The host screamed against the ice, and Lau twisted the cuffs and slammed them around his wrist.

Todd rocked back, blood spattering the front of his Kevlar, and slapped his cuffs into Lau's outstretched fingers with blue numb hands. Lau pushed up the host's sleeves, peeling off his mittens with seeping hands to add the second pair of cuffs over bare skin.

It was impossible to overestimate a gamma. Even a drugged and restrained one. "Jesus," Lau yelped. "Ow. He's freezing my damn hands--"

Not just her hands. Her breath would have hissed blue clouds between her teeth no matter what, but Todd could see the bruised color creeping up her wrists, and winced in sympathy. Lau closed a hand jerkily over the cuffs and squeezed, and the host shouted. "We'll get you warm," Lau said. "Dammit. Ow! Stop. I promise, I promise. I'll take you someplace warm. Right now. You'll never ever be cold again, but you have to stop doing that."

And just like that, the host went limp, collapsing into the ice. Lau looked up at Todd, shaking each set of fingers out by turns while Todd rubbed his own numb ones. She always kept one hand on the cuffs while she did it.

"Let's get him inside. Now, while the tranq is still working." *Three darts*, she said with her eyebrows.

Hands on his knees, heaving from the sprint and the struggle, Todd shook his head. "James Unbefucking Bond. Lady, I'm supposed to be the crazy lucky one."

Knee in the host's back, shifting her weight before she stood, she grinned. "Gotta think invincible."

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Jan. 4th, 2008 – Jan. 6th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

Let's split up. We can be spread over more ground that way.

- Jan. 4th, 2008 at 9:23 AM

Sleep since 5 am yesterday: 3 hrs, 7 minutes

Calories since midnight: ~4300, mostly in the form of bean and cheese burritos me and the Wabbit are assembling in the cop shop microwave out of stuff from cans and grocery store tortillas, dousing in Texas Pete, and eating standing up over the sink. One of the local cops (the woman) left a box of doughnuts on our tiny shared desk this morning, and two large coffees from Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. Maybe there is a God.

And yet, that was not enough, because...

[Begin intentionally vague section of post.]

With both **0metotchtli** and I in Vermont, that means I'm (we're) also working Hubbard County remotely. It's just like old times, except **trollcatz** is home base instead of us. It wouldn't be so bad if Mom were fit for duty, but as it is, all six of us in the field are stretched pretty thin.

I'm not sure I like this trend of two unrelated incidents at once, and both of 'em sprees. Especially after the thing at Q. And San Diego. But I keep telling myself that it's just a coincidence.

Please let it be just a coincidence.

Dad and the Cowboy have been out since midnight in unmarked vehicles, driving up and down and hoping to get lucky. Sun's well up now, so they should be staggering in soon. I made coffee.

Harpy, fret about them, not us. We're under orders that the only reason we're to leave this police station is if it's on fire, or the Cowboy shows up to drive us back to the hotel, which we might start doing in shifts if something doesn't break soon.

Chance of snow today down to 30%. Which is good and bad. Good in that there's less chance something will happen, because this guy likes weather. Bad in that there's less chance something will happen, because we need to be there when it does.

[End intentionally vague section of post, because really, I shouldn't be talking about this stuff, under flock or not.]

My popper just popped. Time for another burrito. And to beat Wabbit off that box of doughnuts long enough to swipe a couple. They make doughnuts with maple frosting up here.

Everything maple, as far as the eye can see.

- Current Mood: crappy
- Current Music: Ramasutra – Kwaidan

January 5th, 2008

[that's not a riot it's a feast, let's eat!]

Jan. 5th, 2008 at 4:33 PM

There's a Price Chopper in St. Johnsbury. We may not have to eat the huskies after all.

And I may be adapting. I'm only wearing two sweaters, and I'm hardly cold at all.

Also, they moved the thaw up. Sunday is supposed to hit 39.

- Current Mood: cynical
- Current Music: Nine Inch Nails - Capital G

January 6th, 2008

[My god, daytime weekend TV.]

- Jan. 6th, 2008 at 8:35 AM

Sick. Worried. Team v. quiet out there. Stuck in hotel.

Can't sleep anymore. I keep dreaming about the snow, anyway. Soft and warm. Real snow, right now, more crunchy and cold. Thaw is coming.

...

I wonder if Dad would notice if I started billing porn movies to the room.

I wonder if Harpy would kill me if I commandeered a civilian vehicle and went down to the cop shop.

Harpy? Wabbit? Any interest in coming to Texas with me on Memorial Day weekend? Is heap big music festival.

Somebody talk to me, please.

- Current Mood: fever, aching, chills, nausea, oh and a migraine aura yay
- Current Music: Kaiser Chiefs - Born to Be a Dancer

"Dawn, and underneath a fig tree, one animal has already had its first brush with death."

Jan. 6th, 2008 at 6:14 PM

And I think the animal in question may be me. Apparently, the Chaz has entered its hibernation phase, which involves a great deal of mucus and cocooning itself in layers of kleenex.

But the Discovery Channel has *Walking With Prehistoric Beasts* on, which means I can huddle in my blankets and drink coconut chili chicken soup and watch CGI *ambulocetus* and *gastornis* try to eat each other!

Ooo. Gastornis!

Giant! Carnivorous! Ants!

Best TV show *ever*!

- Current Mood: crappy
- Current Music: Giant! Carnivorous! Ants!

Hafidha Gates's LiveJournal, Jan. 10th, 2008

My, I'll bet you monsters lead interesting lives.

We're from the Government and we're here to help.

Jan. 10th, 2008 at 1:46 PM

Hey guys? Were we using those for anything?

FBI wiretaps dropped due to unpaid bills.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Telephone companies have cut off FBI wiretaps used to eavesdrop on suspected criminals because of the bureau's repeated failures to pay phone bills on time.

Yup.

Making ourselves look great since 1908.

- Current Mood: quixotic

- Current Music: Tracy Chapman - Crossroads

Also, did you guys see this?

Jan. 10th, 2008 at 1:52 PM

via: http://www.warrenellis.com/?p=5437

"A man who believed he bore the "mark of the beast" used a circular saw to cut off one hand, then he cooked it in the microwave and called 911, authorities said."

...what are the *odds*?

No, I mean really. What. Are the odds?

I think I feel a little sick.

- Current Mood: somebody tell me I'm drunk. or dreaming.
- Current Music: OK Go - Invincible

Hand

Chicago, IL, January, 2008

"Yeahwhat?" Dice is still half-asleep, but he's got panic-adrenaline to make up for it. It only takes one to teach the body that phone calls at weird times are bad news. And he's had more than one the past few months. Being a serial killer's next-of-kin isn't a fun job.

"Mr. Cieslewicz? This is Special Agent Char--"

"Charles Villette with the FBI, yeah, I recognize your voice." Christ, manners much? But all that adrenaline is surging around and there's nothing he can do with it. "What is it? Something wrong with Eddie?" But why would the FBI be calling and not the hospital, unless--"Oh shit he hasn't escaped has he? He promised me he wouldn't, but I don't--"

"Mr. Cieslewicz!"

"Sorry," Dice says in a small voice.

"No, it's not--as far as I know, your brother's fine."

As fine as he ever is, Dice thinks, but he lets out a breath so tight it hurts and says, "Okay. This is my clue to shut up and let you talk."

And he hears the fed take a breath as well, and say, "I'm calling to inform you that there's been a case in Idaho that bears some similarities to Eddie's."

"Oh." Dice blinks, knuckles his eyes, swings his legs over the edge of the battered couch. Oh, God, it's just afternoon. Winter light pushes around the edges of his blackout curtains. "Is anybody--"

"There's no suspicion of homicide," the fed says, big words to soften the edges of *We don't think anybody's dead*.

This time.

"We're investigating. I just--" When he hesitates, he sounds as creepy-young as Dice remembers him looking. And then he finishes in an unprofessional rush. "I wanted you to hear it from me before you heard it on the news."

Silence. Waiting.

Dice says, "Oh."

The fed says, "Sorry."

And Dice says, "No. Thank you."

Numbly, he hangs up the phone.

Gunmetal

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., January, 2008

It was obvious from the moment Brady and Daphne walked through the swinging door that they had been bickering since Baltimore. They were still doing it as they walked past his desk, but Chaz--who had been alone in the bullpen until then--didn't even bother lifting his head.

Brady said patiently, "Gray."

Daphne slung her satchel on the desk, dropped into her chair, and replied with infinite forbearance, "Blue."

Brady propped a hip on the corner of his desk. It creaked alarmingly. "Gray."

"Blue," Daphne explained, while Chaz rested his left hand across his mouth and concentrated very hard on the statistical breakdown of major crimes in the Northeast for 2004.

But Brady shook his head and, in the tone of someone dealing with a four-year-old's fit of the *Whys*, said, "Gray."

Daphne spun her chair around, crossed her arms, and leaned forward. "Totally blue. Blue like a blue thing! *Blue.* Chaz, tell him Sol's eyes are blue."

Yup. Hand across the mouth was one of his better ideas, because he managed to bite down on the knuckles until his giggles passed, and with every air of obliviousness, reply: "Gunmetal."

A startled second later, Daphne crowed out loud, rocking back in her chair hard enough to rattle the casters against the floor.

Disgustedly, behind her, Brady said, "Sheeit. Even his *eyes* can't keep their story straight."

Pleco

Bethesda, MD, February 2008

As they stood in the narrow living room of Todd's townhouse, motion in the fifty gallon tank against the back wall drew Brady's attention. He picked his way around a battered leather armchair strategically positioned under a reading lamp and crouched down to get a better look.

A shoal of neon tetras slalomed through the water weeds, blue-silver with a shock of scarlet like a cut lip. As they turned, they winked in and out of sight, revolving signs on some underwater Vegas strip. Hypnotic; he could *feel* his blood pressure drop.

"How do you keep them alive?"

"Long-term feeders," Todd called from the kitchen. "They make them to last seven or fourteen days. If I were ever gone longer, Hafs has a key." Re-entering through the arch, he tossed Chaz an orange and an apple. "Start on those."

As Chaz crunched through the skin of the apple, Brady saw a lumpy torpedo-shaped mud-brown animal sidle along the glass at the bottom of the tank, scraping through green algae with a mouth that worked like something out of Ellen Ripley's nightmares. Its flanks were marked with polka dots inside outline squares. It looked like a miniature whale shark.

"That's one ugly critter," Brady said, and touched the glass next to the the four-inch horror. He didn't tap. It was just trying to eat its lunch. "Catfish?"

Todd ducked beside him, warmth of his shoulder brushing Brady's. Every day on the job with these people was a little piece of finding home.

Todd said, "That's Pleco."

Brady tilted a skeptical look at him, giving him the rope. "You named your fish?"

Ironically, one of his best roles was straight man to Todd.

"No, it's not a name. Do I look like someone who would name fish? Plecostomus is just too long to say. So it's an abbreviation."

"Uh huh," Chaz mumbled, through apple.

Todd winked. "Okay, a nickname... okay, a name. Look, consistency is not my virtue, all right? Isn't he cute? In a manly way, of course."

"Manly." Brady straightened up. If he'd ever known anybody less concerned about manly than Sol Todd, he couldn't think of an example now. As if considering his answer deeply, he said, "It's okay. Fish are butch. I mean, as long as they're not *angel*fish or something."

Chaz swallowed the bite of apple with an audible gulp, and interjected, "Actually, y'know, angelfish are ambush predators. So they're not as girly as they look."

Todd shook his head. "Grasshopper, you've got to stop taking the job home with you."

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, Feb. 19th, 2008 - Feb. 20th, 2008

Three things!

- Feb. 19th, 2008 at 9:03 AM

1) Okay, 0., She Wants Revenge = yes. It's like the Eighties rose up from the grave and came looking for *braiiiiiiiiins*. The good part of the Eighties. I can't decide if it's more Joy Division/Bauhaus or Psychedelic Furs, but it's evil earworm city.

2) 140,664 People

3) I like kneading dough. The pretzels came out awesome, though next time I'm going to use much less sugar than the recipe calls for--they are a little too sweet, and the sugar's killed much of the sourdough flavor. I didn't use as much flour as the recipe calls for, which is part of it, but then I tend to measure flour into dough by the does-it-feel-right technique rather than by ounces and cups.

When I did the boiling, I used water with baking soda and salt in it, to help the crust get chewy. I am pretty sure this recipe would also make beautiful bagels, because these are the just-right kind of chewy pretzels that are remarkably like the just-right kind of chewy bagels. Next time, I might let it rise longer in the fridge, to develop more lactic acid, and I might try making

them part-whole-wheat. Maybe the King Arthur white whole wheat flour, because I don't want to mess up the texture.

Dough is really tactile stuff. You have to poke at it until it feels right. Most people don't work it long enough, and wind up with bread without much texture, which is sad.

I've mentioned the baby's-bottom/woman's breast test before (if it feels like living flesh, it's approaching the right consistency, and the surface texture should be similar--a little bit tacky, but mostly smooth and pleasant to touch, and it should have sucked up all the stray bits of dough and flour from the kneading surface with the irresistible gravitational attraction of a black hole. Another good test is the windowpane test. This is how you tell if the gluten is adequately developed. You pinch off a piece of dough, roll it into a ball, and gently stretch it between your fingers. If you can stretch it fine enough that the center of the piece thins to a translucent membrane, and you can see light and shadow through it, it's done.

Dough is also therapy. You can pound a lot of frustrations into a pile of flour and salt and yeast and water, and that you come out on the other end with bread is kind of wonderful. And also probably kind of metaphorical.

And now I have to go heat my pretzels up, so I can feed my friends. And hey, Dad's arm is out of the sling. I wonder if he will accept a pretzel in congratulations.

- Current Mood: accomplished
- Current Music: She Wants Revenge - Broken Girl

Tags:

- bread

February 20th, 2008

The circling vultures cast their shadows across my desk.

Feb. 20th, 2008 at 8:08 AM

When you peel a sweet potato, you can smell the soil it grew in. Isn't that awesome? I can stand in my itty bitty kitchen and smell the dirt in Georgia or California or Mexico or Chile.

I mostly cook with ingredients in as close to their original state as I can. Easier to keep track of what I'm eating that way, and hey, fun!

But plans change, unexpected unexpectedness arises, and sometimes you need to make dinner in twenty minutes with little or no advance notice. When that happens, you still want it to not suck.

Times like that, here's one of the things I do.

You need:
olive oil (I <3 Popeye's girlfriend)
a big sweet potato
an onion
a can of black beans
frozen whole-kernel corn
salsa, homemade or store-bought
other herbs and seasonings
cooked rice

If you're making white rice, start it now. I make a ton of brown rice at the beginning of the week, so I grab a me-appropriate serving out of the container in the fridge, put it in a bowl, and set it aside.

Peel the sweet potato and cut into bite-sizeish cubes. (Actual size depends on how much time you have. Small pieces cook faster!) Coat the bottom of your big cast-iron frying pan (or your equivalent) with oil, get it heating on

the stove. Throw the cubed sweet potato in, cover, and let it cook. Stir occasionally.

While the sweet potato is softening up, cut the onion into nice chunky bits, about the size of the first joint of your finger. (If you have fresh garlic and you're speedy with your big chef's knife, you can slice about four garlic cloves, too. Unless you're uncertain about the appropriateness of residual garlic relative to whatever you're hurrying dinner for, in which case, don't.) I like spicy, so I also got out the jar of serrano peppers, snagged out a medium-size one, pushed some of the inside pith and seeds out with the point of my knife, and chopped it up fine. That's optional, though.

Check the sweet potatoes. Have they turned a little more golden and a little less red, and are firm but not crispy? Add the onion (and pepper and garlic, if you chopped those). Dollop on garlic powder (if you didn't use the fresh garlic), oregano, and cumin to suit you. (Remember, the oregano flavor wakes up as it heats, so don't underestimate its mighty power.) Sautee until the onions are translucent.

Add about three or four tablespoons of salsa, depending on the hotness of the salsa and your passion for scoville units (the measure of pepper hotness!) and stir into the other things. I make my own salsa, usually, and try to always have some in the fridge. You can also buy other people's fresh salsa. But for when you're caught totally flat-footed, it's nice to have a jar in the cupboard. There are lots of good store-bought ones, and the best ones aren't even the most expensive. Check the labels on some of the supermarket brands, looking for as few hard-to-identify and unpronounceable ingredients as possible. (My favorite storebought salsa is a supermarket label made with chipotle peppers. Mmmm, smoked hot peppers!)

Now for the frozen corn--about a cup's worth--and the can of black beans, with their liquid. Now simmer! simmer! okay! with the cover on the pan. You won't really have time to simmer it long enough to age and blend the flavors, but that's not what this is about.

If you've got pre-made rice, pop it in the microwave and nuke it for 30 seconds to a minute. After a minute or so of simmering, fork out a chunk of sweet potato and make sure it's done. If it is, serve over rice and eat!

Failure mode: burning. But you're not going to do that, because you don't have time to let it cook that long, right? You might have time to start the sweet potatoes cooking and then dash away to do something else, thinking you will be more efficient that way. But that's why I told you to start chopping the onions instead. (Do not--NOT, I say!--crank the heat up under it thinking to make it cook faster. That will result in undesirable blackened food! and heartache! and stopping at a drive-thru!)

This makes two big filling servings for the non-metabolically challenged, or one serving for me that's just the right size when I'm a little too nervous to eat as much as I otherwise would. After all, in a hurry, remember?

This is another thing my grad school office mate and I would eat. (Assignments to grade, papers to finish, bands playing in town...the life of a grad student is always intense.) I tried to convince him it was an authentic traditional American southwestern regional specialty. He laughed and laughed, even though I told him commercial canning dates back to the mid-nineteenth century.

- Current Mood: dignified.
- Current Music: Black Rebel Motorcycle Club - Weapon of Choice (earworm version)

Tags:

- recipes

Ring Finger

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., March, 2008

Daphne Worth pushed back her chair, stood up, and marched across the aisle and around Chaz Villette's desk--and Chaz Villette--until she could loom over Sol Todd, both hands on her hips, forehead furrowed with her glower. "All right, Duke," she growled. "I've heard six different versions of this from the team. I want the definitive story. How did you screw up your hand?"

Mildly, Todd looked up through the top half of his bifocals. "You don't trust your teammates?"

Chaz didn't look up from the LiveJournal entry he was furtively typing in Textpad. "You told me it was frostbite. At a commune in Vermont."

"New Hampshire," Nikki Lau corrected. She didn't have to lean around Brady for once. He was at the coffee station.

Chaz said, "I'm pretty sure it was Vermont."

"Right." Daphne crossed her arms. "That's a weird pattern for frostbite, Todd."

Duke sighed and pushed his chair away from the desk, leaning back in it with his arms crossed. "Well, it seemed more believable than the real story."

There was a rattle as Lau stood. "Wait a minute, stall him. I need to get coffee. Anybody want a slice of cake?"

Chaz raised his hand, minimizing windows with the other one. He punched the intercom button on his phone and when Hafidha answered, "Yeah, Platypus?" he said, "Code Yellow."

"On my way," Hafidha answered. "Tell Nikki to grab me some cake!"

She had taken up a station by the corner of Chaz's desk when Lau returned, Balancing her own cup of coffee and three plates, she also had Brady in tow. They passed out cake and settled themselves, and Duke said, "Okay, you kiddies all comfy? Anybody need another pillow? No? All right. What

really happened is that my ex-wife bit them off. See, she'd just caught me in bed with twin Mexican aerialists."

Daphne stepped away from the desk, pausing behind Chaz's. Arms still folded, she said, "You ever notice how all these phrases crop up in Duke's stories that you really never expected to hear? Like 'twin Mexican aerialists'?"

Duke swiped at her ineffectually. "Fraternal twins. Anyway, it wasn't what she thought. But she wasn't exactly willing to listen, and I suppose I should count myself fortunate that it was the ring she was demanding, and not anything else.">

"She bit your fingers off to get your wedding ring," Lau said, pausing with a forkful of cake halfway to her mouth. Chaz hadn't even paused in hoovering--pun intended--his double-sized portion up to roll his eyes.

Duke shrugged. "She'd been demanding I return it, so she could stuff it up my nose. She really felt awful about it after she calmed down, and I can see why she might have been jealous. It did look bad. But by the time she gave me the ring back it was too late to get the fingers reattached. And anyway, it's kind of convenient. Now, if I need to claim to be married, people feel bad pointing out that I'm not wearing a ring."

Chaz set his fork down on the empty plate. "So I take it that was the end of the relationship?"

"Hell, no. It lasted another eight fantastic months. Until she left me for an encyclopedia salesman." Duke sighed dramatically.

"Dog sigh," Brady stage-whispered.

Duke threw a wad of paper at him. "Hey. Some women, you will put up with a lot for. What was her name? Lola? Lucinda? Something like that."

Hafidha tapped her plate with the tines of her fork. "Hello. Marriage licenses are public record, Agent Todd. You've never been married."

Duke grinned. "Common-law. Hey, is there still any of that cake?"

Return of Pleco

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. March 2008

Solomon Todd was surveying his desk with such satisfaction that Reyes had to go over and look.

He recognized everything: the paperclip sculptures; the stacks of steno pads, each filled with what Sol claimed was shorthand; the little brass Buddha, his stomach shiny from rubbing. Except--something new. 5x9, sleek modernist picture frame, sharply moody black and white photo of a polka-dotted, whiskered, underwater shape.

"What the hell is that?"

"That's Pleco," Sol said smugly.

"The who with the which now?" said Lau, leaning across her desk.

"*Hypostomus plecostomus*," said Sol. "Pleco for short. A fish."

"We've met," Chaz said, raising his eyebrows. "I see you got his good side."

"You have a picture of a fish on your desk," Reyes said, frowning. "Not that it's not a nice picture--"

Brady twiddled a pencil across the backs of his fingers, the quirk of his mouth alerting Reyes in advance. "They're long-time companions," Brady said. "Don't tell me you discriminate."

Reyes raised his hands in surrender. "Your fish, Todd. Your rules." He backed away, making a break for his office, but not before Sol got the last word in.

"I rest my case," said Sol. "This is Pleco, and he is my fish."

Mumm-ra

Belfast, TN, April, 2008

Do not, Nicolette Lau says firmly to herself, *think about the smell.*

Behind her, Brady whispers, "Jesus, what did he do to them?" and for a moment she envies him so much it feels like hatred. Because when you're a 6'2" ex-army jock who could bench press most of your colleagues, you can get away with stuff like that and no one will wonder about your ability to handle yourself. No one will wonder if maybe they should have left you outside the crime scene. No one will wonder if maybe they should have left you with the civilians and the noncombatants.

No one's going to call Danny Brady a sissy girl.

She gets her chin up, takes a breath--not through her nose, thank you--and says, "It looks like DIY mummification to me." She swings her flashlight to light the row of metal shelves along the basement's east wall. "I think he's using Mason jars as--" It almost gets away from her there; she has to bite down hard on a lunatic giggle, has to concentrate to keep her voice from skying up into dog-whistle range. "As canopic jars."

"All those dried flowers," Brady says. "All those dried fucking flowers. Here I was thinking he'd just read *Great Expectations* one too many times, and I should've been thinking "A Rose for Emily" instead. Jesus."

Lau remembers "A Rose for Emily" because who would've thought Faulkner had it in him, and *Great Expectations* has the creepy old lady with her dried out wedding cake, doesn't it? Or was that an old *Wonder Woman* story?

She shakes her head. "C'mon. He's not down here, and we'd better look around." She's suspicious about the basement's west wall; it's too close to the stairs, and it's unfinished cinderblock where the rest of the walls are seventies-nightmare fake wood paneling.

She starts toward the first table: it looks as DIY as the Mason/canopic jars with their neat masking tape labels, like the table in her folks' basement where Dad and Bobby and Pete had run their model train. *No girls allowed*, Bobby had said. And it hadn't helped that he'd added, looking at Tim, *No babies either*. There are girls allowed down here, though. She's betting this

first mummy is Cynthia Dalton, 24, who's been missing for three months. There are cheap costume jewelry rings on every interlaced, individually wrapped finger, and Mardi Gras beads make a pectoral that glows and glitters in the beam of her flashlight.

It takes her a moment to realize Brady isn't following. She turns back, raising her eyebrows at him, and is startled to find that he's looking at her, not at the mummies or the Mason jars or even that west wall that's making her more and more unhappy.

"You don't have to prove anything to me, you know," he says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nikki." His tone says *cut the bullshit* as clearly as his exasperated face. "You can admit you're as creeped out as I am. I won't make you turn in your invisible plane."

"My *what?*"

He grins, as dazzling and brief as heat lightning. "Todd told me about the helicopter."

For a moment she wants to scream, but that never works. And on second thought, it *is* pretty funny. "Well, if I'm Wonder Woman, you must be Steve Trevor. Come on, Steve-O. Let's do our job."

Hafidha Gates's LiveJournal, May 8th, 2008

My, I'll bet you monsters lead interesting lives.

[locked] So, uh, er. We're going out Friday night?

May. 8th, 2008 at 11:37 AM

...is it okay if my not-a-date brings a date?

Yeah, criminy, I don't know. I just work here.

- Current Mood: weird
- Current Music: Tee-M's Unsigned Music Show, WPMD-LA

Lying

Woodbridge, VA, May, 2008
Daniel Brady is lying to his mother.

He lies to his mother once a week, regular as clockwork, and has since he went away to college at the age of eighteen. Oh, the lies have changed over the years; when he was eighteen, he only lied to her about who he dated.

He's never come out to his mother. Not exactly. Because to do that would be to make her lie to his father, and he can't do that to her. (Growing up, he has discovered, mostly means that you have more and better ways to hurt the people you love.) But he thinks she knows. He thinks she figured it out the Sunday after Andre died when she called and he was so hungover he couldn't even manage to tell her it was the flu. She doesn't ask him about his "dates" any more; she asks him about his "friends."

And he saves stories to tell her: stories about Chaz and the way he eats and the crazy things Hafidha wears and little Nikki Lau who's not half Danny's size but has twice his guts. They're good stories, warm stories, and he knows they make his mother feel better.

That's lie number one.

Lie number two is what he doesn't tell her about his job. Which is most of it. FBI, fine. BAU, fine. But WTF? No, thank you. For one thing, he's not supposed to talk about that with civilians. For another thing, he's not sure how she'd take it.

Daniel Brady was brought up Southern Baptist, with the church ladies looking sidelong at his mother because she had a real profession. But she was brought up Pentecostal Baptist--"just this side of the snake-handlers" she says sometimes, and the secret there is that she's not really joking--and he remembers his Grandfather Gilmer, remembers the absolute pants-wetting terror the old man inspired.

Grandfather Gilmer believed in the Devil. He believed the Devil was loose and walking up and down the land. Danny knows exactly what his Grandfather Gilmer would say about the anomaly, and what he's afraid of is that his mother might agree.

What he's even more afraid of is that that might give the anomaly a way in.

And that's lie number three. Because he's lying to protect her, and he thinks she knows that, or guesses it. But she doesn't know why, and it's going to stay that way. He's made Falkner promise, because he knows who has to write the letters. And he didn't tell her why, but he didn't lie about it, either.

Daniel Brady only lies to his mother.

Third Base

FBI Headquarters, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., May, 2008

Ever since that damned call to Frost, Daphne Worth has been wary of suggestions from Nikki Lau. Well, be fair: only when Lau is wearing that open, honest expression that would put anyone else at ease. It took a little practice. But now Daphne can just tell.

"What?" said Lau.

"What what?"

"Daph, you're giving me a rabbit in the headlights face and I haven't done anything. So, what?"

"What's on second," said Todd.

Baffled, Worth stared at Todd, and then gave Lau an imploring look. "What?"

Lau shrugged. "I don't know."

"Third base!" Todd and Chaz chorused and exchanged solemn ritual high fives.

shadow unit

1.08 “Refining Fire” - by Elizabeth Bear and Emma Bull

Click here to play music.

"Half Angel Half Eagle" © Jane Siberry & Sheeba Records, used with permission.

To Stella Evans and Sunil Shipman.

Day 1

Act I

Tyler County, TX, May 24, 2008

Chaz remembered Hafidha's comment about speed traps, but only after the lights wobbled red/blue in the rearview mirror of the rented Hyundai. They were half-invisible against the glare of the sun in the back window.

He pulled over and rolled his window down. Pine scent, smoke, and warm, humid air wrestled with the aridity inside the car. He kept both hands in sight on the wheel. The trooper's steps grated on the roadside gravel; Chaz mostly registered sunglasses when he leaned down to peer in the driver's side window.

"Driver's license--" The trooper's head turned, sweeping the inside of the car. He jumped back like a cat and snatched at his hip. Chaz froze in the glare of a large-bore, unblinking eye. "Both hands outside the car. Now!"

Chaz remembered. His holstered pistol lay on the passenger seat. Brady had harangued him about knowing where it was at all times, but the butt dug into his ribs if he wore it while driving.

He laid his hands carefully on the outside of the car door. "I'm sorry, officer. I'm an FBI agent. I've got I.D. Can I get it out?" Just at the moment he didn't look like an FBI agent. Actually, he never looked like an FBI agent. But at least he knew how to use his voice, which was soft and light and inclined to crack, to convince people he was harmless.

"Open the door from the outside and step out of the car."

Chaz nodded. He knew the drill.

Outside, he got his I.D. case from his back pocket and fumbled it open one-handed. The cop accepted it, glanced down at it, up at Chaz, down. Chaz could see in his shoulders the moment he chose to trust it. Now that Chaz wasn't preoccupied with not getting shot, he noticed the trooper was maybe a little older than him, blond and sunburnt. Chaz bet there were already squint lines behind his Statey sunglasses.

"Special Agent Charles Villette." The cop pronounced the "i" as long. Chaz's mom hadn't.

Chaz nodded.

"That sounds familiar. Villette."

"My...family was from around here."

"That must be it." He handed Chaz's I.D. back and holstered his revolver. "Sorry about that."

Chaz half expected him to say, "So you're the lamest FBI agent ever, huh?" But if he'd expected to be stopped for speeding, he wouldn't have been speeding, and never mind where he left his gun. "No, I'm sorry. That was dumb of me. I can wait here while you write the ticket."

The trooper's eyebrows climbed, and he pulled his head back. "No, no. No call to write a ticket on one of our own. But you want to slow down. We got deer in these woods, and cattle get through the fences all the time. Hit a two-thousand-pound Angus, and you won't be able to find all the pieces of this Korean tin can." He finished with a man-to-man sort of grin, absolving Chaz of responsibility for the Hyundai's sins. Chaz resisted telling him it seemed like a nice car, actually.

"Um. Thank you. As long as you're here, can you tell me how far it is to County Road 4643?"

"Another five-seven miles or so along that way. You can't miss it."

"Thank you," Chaz said.

The trooper smiled and nodded and went back to his unmarked, and Chaz slid back into the Hyundai, heart sinking. He already knew in East Texas, if someone said, *You can't miss it*, it meant you probably would.

Seven miles on, Chaz admitted he probably had. Next time he tried to find anyplace in rural America, he'd build in at least two hours for getting lost. If he got to the house after dark, there was no point to the exercise.

If it had a point at all.

He could turn west, wend his way to an interstate. He was going to miss his dinner date, but he could still be in Kerrville by the evening concerts, if he did it right now.

For twenty-five years (and a half) he'd done without whatever East Texas had to offer. He was wasting a piece of the next twenty-five on a sentimental attachment he didn't feel. He didn't need to do this.

He couldn't know that for sure. Not until he'd been to the house.

A wildcat gas station with a wood-frame store appeared around a corner and promised to address Chaz's four most pressing needs. He pulled up, stuffed his holstered gun in the glove compartment with the rental papers, and climbed out.

The gas pumps didn't have card readers; they didn't even have "Please Pay Inside" notices, so customers must have expected it. He filled the tank and spotted the restroom signs on the side of the building. They weren't kept locked, but the men's was unassumingly clean and in good repair. Human nature's rural side. He'd bet there wasn't an unlocked bathroom in the D.C. metro area.

The store offered, in addition to the standard quick-stop snacks, drinks, snacks, sunglasses, and snacks, live bait, ammo, snacks, and deer scent lures. The woman at the register was tall, heavy, and brown-haired, and watched Chaz cruise the four long shelves at the center of the store with no attempt to make him think she didn't.

He consulted his inner fuel gauge. Man doth not live by Snickers bars only, but by every amino acid that proceedeth out of the process of digestion doth man live. And also some fiber. Besides, the Snickers would melt. An opened box of individually-wrapped granola bars on a bottom shelf caught his attention--nineteen of them. Chaz took the box up to the counter.

He looked longingly at the coffee machine, but he knew better than to try to drink convenience-store coffee in any straits short of desperate ones, and he

wasn't going to find a Sobe here. He settled for a Dr. Pepper and a Starbucks iced coffee drink. Any port in a storm.

"Pump number two, and these, please?" There were Snickers bars at the counter. They called his name. He dropped one on the box. "And that."

The brown-haired woman blinked. She had blue eyes and long, dense eyelashes. "Those all for you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Damn. If I did that, there'd be enough of me to make three big women." She rang up the sale and ran his Visa. "But three more of you'd barely cast a shadow."

How strange, to be in a place where everyone sounded like his mom. "No bigger 'round than a fencepost," she used to say, so Chaz said it out loud, and the woman at the counter laughed.

"Is this Fred?" he asked.

"Strictly speaking, no. We're a mite north of it. Nearest post office, though. You heading there, honey?"

"Actually, I'm looking for County Road 4643." Though he was pretty sure it was a lost cause.

"Half mile on. You look out for a white shed with a green roof, and an old red horse trailer parked by it. Turn left on the paved road there." She shrugged. "Road crew took the sign down when they fixed the ditch, never put it up again. Hereabouts nobody needs it, I guess."

"Oh. No, I suppose not. Thank you." Huh. Unless someone had moved the horse trailer and painted the shed, he might find it after all.

"You goin' far? Wildfire's over that way, further east. Weather service says the wind might swing, and you don't want to be out there if it does. The fire crew's working up on the county line, but I expect I'll have a yard full of fire camp if that wind shifts." She seemed pleased by the notion.

Then he had to get to the house today; it might be gone tomorrow. Would that be so bad? "Everything's so green. Is there that much danger?"

She blew out through her lips. "Fourth year of drought, honey. Understory 'round here's dry as a Methodist picnic." She laughed at her own joke.

Chaz smiled and slid his card back in his wallet. "Thanks again."

"Drive safe, sugar."

He pushed out the door and back to the Hyundai. It was silver, compact, easy to drive, unassuming to look at. People in East Texas drove pickup trucks, based on what he'd passed between Tyler and here. Well, he wasn't undercover.

Chaz unwrapped the Snickers before he started the car. The chocolate dimpled under his fingertips, clung to his skin in rough sticky peaks. He sucked them clean, glad the rental was an automatic. He had the whole thing eaten before he turned back onto the highway.

The shed and the horse trailer were as advertised. The county road was only paved for the first mile. After that it was washboard gravel, and the Hyundai's steering vibrated like an unbalanced washing machine.

The ranches he passed--no, farms, according to Brady--were small, scrabbling things, clearings chipped out of the heavy dark pine woods. Wherever the road ran straight from the afternoon sun, the warm glow turned the gravel pink, the trees blue-green as if there were light inside the needles. Where the road turned, twilight fell, blue road and black walls of forest.

Chaz slid his cell phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. Maybe one of the team had left a message, an emergency recall. But the only message was the display reading, "Looking for network..." until it gave up and told him where he was, satellites hadn't been invented yet.

Still looking for an excuse to turn around. He could jump off a building, but this scared him. What did he think he was going to find? The worst parts of the story were long over.

His MP3 player was in his duffel bag in the trunk. Bad planning. He gave the radio one last try, and got four Christian stations, all in talk mode. Todd enjoyed arguing with the radio; if he were here, Chaz would enjoy hearing him do it. He turned it off. The rhythm of the road throbbed up his arms and called a tune out of his head.

I am a poor wayfarin' stranger
Traveling through this world of woe
But there's no sickness, toil, or danger
In that bright land to which I go.

Chaz could imagine his mom singing it with him. She used to improvise harmonies; sometimes he thought it had helped fill his head with math. Thirds, fifths, minor sevenths. Her voice was more flexible than his. She could add ornaments to the melody line that he had to simplify and smooth out. But in his head he could hear them.

She would have learned that song here. Most of the ones she taught him would have come from here.

I'm going there to see my loved ones
Who've gone before me one by one

But they hadn't gone before her. She left them. She must have had a good reason. Because he was certain of it, he'd never tried to find her parents, living or dead.

When the letter came from the lawyers for the estate, and he learned his grandmother had died only a year ago, his grandfather eight months before, he regretted it. They could have told him about her. Given that they'd left her the house and land, maybe it would have been something he wanted to hear.

In the end, it was too late for reconciliation. Aye, there's the rub. No one had reconciled, but Chaz was still the beneficiary of the gesture. He owned forty acres of Tyler County he didn't want, and didn't feel good about profiting by. If he sold the place, he wouldn't get half the price of a condo in Arlington, anyway. Unless there was more to these pine trees than met the eye.

I know dark clouds will gather 'round me
I know my way is rough and steep
But golden fields all spread before me
Where blessed saints their vigils keep.

I'm going there to see my mother
She said she'd meet me when I come...

It was hard to tell from the perspective of seven years old, but Chaz thought his mom had liked him. They had a lot of fun, anyway. And he loved it when

she counted on him for things. Balancing the checkbook made her nuts, so she'd read him off a column of numbers and he'd add them for her. She never seemed to think he was odd; instead she regularly told him, "I don't know how I'd manage without you, baby boy." They'd sing together, in the car, making dinner, at bedtime. She loved that she could sing a song to him once and he'd remember it.

There were the nights when he had to stay downstairs with Mrs. Korolenko, but Chaz understood about those even then, though he didn't really know the details of the process. He never saw any of her customers; she didn't bring them home. And Mrs. Korolenko fed him outrageously well.

Looking back, he thought the heroin was a late development. He knew something was off the rails when he found her crying over the kitchen sink. Not that she never cried; but if she did, she told him why, and whether there was anything either of them could do about it. That way it didn't scare him. This time wasn't like that. This time she was leaning on the counter, rocking back and forth, making a thin keening like a hurt animal.

When Chaz asked her what was wrong, she turned and took his face in her hands and peered at him, as if he were a jar of marbles and she was trying to count them and win a contest. Then she made an awful noise, part gulp, part cough, part hum, and pulled him close. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me, baby boy," she said. Which was nice, but not as nice as it would have been if he hadn't been scared.

I want to wear that crown of glory
When I get home to that bright land
I'm gonna shout salvation's story
In concert with that blood-washed band.

She counted on him. And he'd let her down. He hadn't called 911 in time.

The road ended, so he knew he was there. The track that bent off from the course of the road had been a good gravel drive once, with a steel farm gate. Now the gate hung open, dug into the ground at its free end; the weeds were eating the drive from both sides and the middle. He steered around potholes to turn in.

The farm buildings stood thirty yards from the road on a little rise of ground. Afternoon sun lit the front of the ranch-style house and made the white paint

glow; the broken-backed barn seemed small and shy behind it. From the drive it looked no worse than any of the farms he'd passed. But when Chaz parked the car in the dirt beside the house, he saw the paint was alligatored and flaking and two of the black ornamental shutters had fallen off.

An orange trumpet vine grew over the end of the house, rank and invasive, tendrils snaking to claim the drive and the roof shingles. Weed trees thrust up from the sprawling junipers around the foundation. Two yellow rosebushes guarded the front steps. They'd probably been kept pruned once. Now their canes flung out in all directions, like the arms of sea urchins after prey. They didn't seem to mind neglect; they were heavy with big double yellow blooms.

The yard was a muddle of weeds and high grass, already browning and going to seed in the heat and drought. Across the drive beside the barn a swing set frame stood, so rusted Chaz wasn't sure what color it had been. There'd been two swings, but they were gone.

His mom's swing set.

He should have come before they died. He should have met his grandparents, and told them she'd been a good mom, and heard whatever they had to say, no matter what it was. He might have hurt them--his very existence might have been a sharp-edged discovery. But he should have come, taken down the barriers if he could, finished the unfinished sad story.

Even a profiler could only get so much information out of a scene, out of a neglected house, a rusted swing set.

Chaz reached for the gearshift to put the car in reverse. No. He'd regret that later, too. Why multiply regrets? He turned the engine off instead, and got out.

The heat slicked his skin. When he scratched his neck, his fingernails came away black; the smoke he'd smelled all day, accumulated. The heat was a relief--for the first time in a long time, he was warm enough--but the humidity was as bad as D.C. Somebody had to be from East Texas, but did it have to be his people?

The Hyundai's engine ticked as it cooled. An insect chorus droned around him, everywhere and nowhere. He couldn't hear cars, or a plane, or voices, or even wind in the grass.

The rail for the porch steps was black wrought iron, its surface crusted and bubbled with rust. He didn't reach for it. It looked solid, but there was no telling where the metal might be weak from years of traffic, weather, a little girl leaning... It would be a hell of a thing to fall off the steps and break a leg, and have to lie in the weeds until someone came to get him. Daphne would tease him half to death if he did, once she stopped fussing.

He lifted the rose canes gingerly out of the way. One lashed the back of his hand when he let go too soon, and he had to pick the broken thorn out of his knuckle and suck away a drop of blood. Another cane fell across his shoulder as he reached the top step, pinpricking through his shirt. "Prince Charming has arrived," Chaz muttered. "Please don't stab me with a spindle."

The king and queen were dead, and the princess as well. Based on the evidence, the prince, charming or not, had proved unsatisfactory. There'd be no wicked fairies here.

The aluminum-framed screen door was braced with scrollwork to match the stair rail. A half-circle arch of window filled the front door's top panel. UV had faded the paint--afternoon sun every day--but it had been cherry-red, warm, welcoming. A door you'd be happy to unlock and pass through at the end of the day. Someone had loved this house once, painted it, planted roses by it.

His mom had still left.

Chaz felt for the key in his jeans pocket--he'd better have put the key in his pocket and not left it at the attorney's office, yes, that was it--and unlocked the door. It opened easily; the weatherstripping was worn out and crumbling around the frame. Chaz flinched from a wave of hot, stale, moist air, the exhaled breath of a dead house. Then he stepped over the threshold.

He fumbled for the light switch as his stomach grumbled. Lau would say you could set your stopwatch by his gut noises. If he couldn't make his dinner date in Austin--he'd have to call when he had cell service again, and apologize--he wondered what he could find to eat in Tyler County. Barbecue? The history of Texas was the history of smoked meat, dating back over a hundred years. Before refrigeration, you had to preserve the excess somehow.

The light switch wasn't on the left, away from the hinges, where any sensible person would have put it. Maybe a step inside the hall?

Chaz wondered if East Texas barbecue allowed of back ribs, and dreamed briefly of pork under a sweet-sharp glaze, falling off the bone. Or brisket, smoked until it dropped apart like stew meat. He groped along the wall and extended his contemplation to side dishes. Slaw, redolent of vinegar. Turnip greens, pinto beans. Did Texas barbecue involve corn bread, or the squishy overprocessed white stuff, useful only for mopping up sauce? Brady would know.

Maybe he could have a pulled pork sandwich for dessert. He had to be far enough east for pulled pork. He was nearly in Louisiana.

Ah. There was the switch, on the wall beside a full-length mirror and the coat closet door. Senseless place for it. He flipped it, felt the contacts meet. No light. The attorneys had said he'd have electricity and water: the estate was paying the power bill. Damn. No power meant no well pump and no water, and he'd been planning on a drink and a pit stop before the long drive west. Granola bars were dry, and caffeine was a diuretic.

He squinted through dimness at the ceiling. The glass globe was off the entryway fixture, and the sockets empty. That explained that, then. It didn't matter: he had a mini Maglite on his keychain, and there was daylight left. Get in, do the profile, get out.

Chaz sniffed, and listened. Stale air. A whiff of mildew. Smell of rodents. There were probably mouse droppings all over the place. Was East Texas in the hantavirus belt? Thirty-three cases in Texas since 1993. He didn't know the locations of all the outbreak sites, but the ones he did know were in the western half of the state.

When he held his breath, he could hear a hum. Something electrical, maybe the pump. He took another breath about sticky enough to drink and wished the attorneys had turned on the air conditioning.

He thought about leaving the door open, for the light. Nobody out here but him and Leatherface, and the occasional mule deer. But with his luck, if he left it open a critter would run inside and he'd be here until midnight getting it out. The door wasn't hung level; when he let go, it swung and slammed.

He clicked the Maglite on, to supplement the sun that got through the dusty glass. The flooring was tile by the entry, then sand-colored wall-to-wall, dingy and flattened with years of people walking around the same furniture in the same places. A vacuum cleaner only did so much. And an elderly couple would hoard their strength for better things than housecleaning. The walls were taupe. Why was everything taupe, everywhere you went? Hafidha, bemoaning her landlord's taste, had referred to it as "white, three percent rat shit" and the memory made Chaz smile.

When he stepped on the carpet, black dots speckled his shoes and socks and popped off again, hopping in and out of the rug fibers.

Wonderful. Texas had fleas.

This must have been a pleasant place once. A ranch-style house, open-plan, a breakfast bar separating the kitchen from the great room, which he thought was a converted one-car garage by the size. Or would his grandparents have called it a family room? When they did the conversion, did they still have a family?

The furniture consisted of a tweed sectional couch and two matching chairs, a set of glass-and-wrought-iron coffee and side tables with built-in magazine racks, and a TV unit with an elderly Panasonic television. The screen was pale and dull with dust, a blind eye. His reflection moved across it like an eddy of smoke.

Against the back wall stood his mother's piano. Chaz knew it was hers; she taught him to play, on Mrs. Korolenko's upright, her hands covering his on the keys. He crossed the room, lifted the lid to reveal the keyboard. The varnish was sticky and peeling, but that could be fixed. It would be out of tune, of course--

But his first pressure on the skin-oil-stained middle C made him wince. Not just out of tune; he would bet the soundboard was cracked. Still, he stroked the white keys, high to low, with his fingertips, too lightly to make them sound. Was sentimental value enough to make it worth fixing?

Something of hers. Something she had touched for years, and tried to give to him.

He bit his lip, and closed the lid as gently as he might stroke a sleeping child's hair, and turned to survey the rest of the room.

Past the breakfast bar the kitchen wallpaper was sepia-and-tan, printed with antique farm implements. The refrigerator and the dishwasher were off-white; the electric range was gold. Dead palms and one philodendron with three green leaves sat in Navajo pots.

Chaz blinked at the philodendron. He knew they were stubborn, but that one must be hanging on from atmospheric moisture alone. Maybe he should figure out how to get it back to D.C.; a green plant that might survive an FBI agent's care deserved to be rescued.

In the corner by the fireplace--*who the hell needs a fireplace in East Texas*?--ivy grew through the join of the roof and the wall, leggy from lack of sun, curling down toward the picture window.

Texas was already taking the house down.

That'll cost a little something to fix. Only after he'd thought it did he realize he was considering keeping the place.

It could be a nice house again. And somewhere back there was a bedroom that had been his mother's. *But what would you do with forty acres of Tyler County, Chaz?* Well, it wasn't as if the taxes amounted to much. Maybe he could rent it.

He looked for a bookshelf, but the only shelf was devoted to knickknacks and empty space. He grimaced as he imagined growing up in a house where the reading material consisted of piles of *Redbook* and *Better Homes and Gardens* and the county extension bulletin.

He shone his light across the shelf. There were marks in the dust there from picture frames. There'd been photographs, but somebody had removed them. The attorneys, for safekeeping? He'd ask when he returned the key.

The floor plan built itself in Chaz's head. He guessed when the great room had still been a garage, the funny little L-shaped entryway had accessed the house on the other side, and what was now a breakfast bar between support columns had been a weight-bearing exterior wall. So if he went around that wall, through the connecting arch, he should be in the old living and dining room--

Motion in the shadows, right in front of him. "Jesus!" He grabbed for his gun. *In the car*. Face-to-face with a tall thin man, brown-skinned, with wavy

flyaway hair--

Himself. The panicky expression tipped him off. The far wall of the dining room was surfaced in gold-flecked mirror tiles, and his own face stared back from between another stand of dead palms.

Good thing he'd left the gun in the car. Shooting the house would be embarrassing. And unlike the speeding stop, he'd have to explain that one, when he accounted for the spent cartridge.

On his left was the kitchen with a back door, and on this side of it a dark corridor that must lead to the bathroom and bedrooms. The dining room faced the front of the house; low sun burned through the green boughs of those yellow roses. The window must be open a crack, because their scent and the drone of bees filled the room.

Chaz sneezed. Twice. As his eyes cleared, he realized that what he had taken for a pile of debris under the table wasn't that, exactly.

Somebody had been tearing up the tile, and the house's slab foundation lay exposed at the center of the room. The glass-topped table and white metal chairs were pushed against the far wall, and Chaz could make out tools--a power drill with a cement bit, a heap of chain, other scraps of hardware.

Apparently, he had a squatter. And one who had come prepared to do some digging and hoisting.

Treasure hunters?

Maybe it wasn't such a lucky thing he'd left his gun in the car. He switched the Maglite off and silenced the jingle of his keys with his palm.

Discretion was definitely the better part of valor. He could drive back to the gas station and call for assistance. Wouldn't it be funny if he got the same cop?

Silently now, picking his footing, Chaz slipped back through the archway into the great room, and turned the corner towards the entryway. This time, when he caught sight of himself in the full-length mirror by the coat closet, he managed not to jump out of his skin. *More damned mirrors. Those are coming out.*

Then his reflection raised its head and said, "Addy?"

Not a reflection. A tall man, thin to the point of emaciation, cheekbones pressing brown skin taut under sunken eyes. He stepped forward, and Chaz stepped back, wishing his mini-Maglite were the heavy club-shaped variety instead.

"I'm a federal agent," Chaz said. Which counted for exactly nothing right now. Pretend otherwise. "You're trespassing on private prop--"

--*erty*. The half-word caught in his throat, stopped there. His tongue was as sluggish as if he were trying to speak through a mouthful of cotton candy. His hands tingled; his head spun. And yet with the disorientation came a sense of tremendous satisfaction, comfort--triumph, even.

Chaz turned. The location of the back door was recorded in his near-perfect spatial memory. Retreat, escape. He fumbled around the corner into the archway, saw himself--again--in the mirror of the dining room.

Waves of dizziness rolled up him from toes to crown. He leaned on the wall, pulled himself spider-fingered through the arch. That distant crash must be his keys hitting the tile. The stranger loomed behind him, reflected in the mirror like a shadow twin.

Chaz raised his hands, as if he could ward off whatever came next, but his flailing hit nothing. He could see the man behind him in the mirror. In front of him? They couldn't both be true.

He wobbled on unsteady legs. He was excited. Eager. It made his stomach twist. That and the sweetish, sick-cloying scent--

"No," Chaz said. He heard himself say it, his voice as it would sound outside the chamber of his own skull.

And the stranger must have heard it too, because he said, "It's only ether, boy. You use it to make ticks back out," and pressed a cloth over his mouth and nose.

He grabbed the man's arm and dug his fingernails in. The blunt pain on his own skin shocked him. He breathed in.

Act II

Chaz woke, convulsively retching. His diaphragm knotted; his abdominal muscles ached. Gelatinous strings of bile slipped from his mouth, and

something--gritty tile--pressed his cheek. In the darkness, he couldn't tell where he was, but the air was cold and full of the scent of roses.

He lifted his face from the puddle of vomit and assessed the situation.

Something tight on his wrists, blood-warm, unyielding. He tried to turn them, to press them together or pull them wide. But they were locked a relentless four inches apart, and when he lifted them from the floor, clanking weight dragged beneath. He remembered the chain and the drill, and--heart sinking--felt his way down each link to the end.

It was padlocked to a staple, fixed to the floor with cement bolts with three-quarter-inch heads. He couldn't twist his fingers to feel what bound his wrists, but he rubbed it against his cheek and got a sense of the design: two U-shaped hasps, hinged to a bar and padlocked shut in the center. Another lock held a loop of chain closed around the home-made manacles. The chain itself was welded steel, by the weight, and he'd guess the breaking strain at ten thousand pounds.

Not a chance.

To add insult to injury, his stomach rumbled.

Chaz retched again, turning his head so the vomit would splash to the side, but there was nothing left to come up. He might vomit up his shoes at any second, he thought, except he was barefoot. Barefoot, and his shirt was untucked, the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. Irritably, he reached to push the tails of the shirt inside the waistband of his jeans, but his arms wouldn't bend that way.

When Chaz wore a button-front shirt, he liked it tucked in and the cuffs fastened. Not to be able to fix it was like a rock in his shoe.

If he had shoes.

Oh God, this was bad. Bad, stupid, careless--

He sat still and listened to the darkness. Night sounds, crickets, some sort of frog or spring peeper. No sense of anybody else in the house. No sense of motion.

He patted his front jeans pockets, shifted to feel the back ones. No keys, no phone, no wallet. No I.D. case. The only comfort was that, from what he

could remember, the stranger looked even less like an FBI agent than Chaz did.

When he thought he could move without vomiting, Chaz pushed himself to his feet and tested the length of his chain. One step in each direction, standing. Probably three if he was on his knees. About a yard of chain, then; maybe four feet. Enough to stand up. Enough to lie down. Enough to crawl away from the pool of vomit.

Not enough to get his back against the wall, though he could touch it with his feet in one direction.

God, it was dark out here.

And cold. Chaz didn't have much insulation on his best day; now, he was hungry and dehydrated and his muscles ached from the ether and vomiting. He wondered if the stranger would leave him here to starve. It wouldn't take long, even if he tried to limit his activity. That might be why there didn't seem to be many gammas and betas in earlier days; the sheer caloric load would be unsupportable in a culture of scarcity. You needed a society that could provide ice cream by the half-gallon year-round to have a chance of making it.

The crunch of car tires on the gravel drive, the swing of headlights across the front of the house, ended that line of speculation. Chaz heard the thump of loud music--ZZ Top--and male voices, cheerful and laughing. He stood and peered out the window, but couldn't see anything through the canes of the rose bush except a silhouette stepping out of the car, carrying a heavy bundle. Was the stranger working with a partner? Teams egged each other on. That could be a worst-case scenario--

No. In that case, whatever was going to happen was going to happen. And it might be a bystander, hope of rescue.

Chaz drew breath and yelled, screamed bloody murder, leaning against the chain. But the tail lights dimmed as the vehicle pulled away.

Loud music. Maybe they were right about the hearing damage.

The key turned in the front door lock, and this time the entryway light came on. He must have replaced the bulbs.

Other lights too, in the living room, before the man came through the arch, lugging two bags of groceries. His gaze swept over Chaz, but he didn't speak. Chaz could see white bread, the plastic frill on a bag of apples. The man ducked around the corner into the kitchen. Chaz heard the rustle of the brown paper, the clank of cans against each other, the flat knocking of plastic jars and bottles--the man had set the bags down. He emerged, raising a hand to the wall to bring up the dimmer-controlled light in the dining room.

They stood facing each other across twelve and a half feet, and Chaz realized he was standing hunched, cowering, shaking like a starving Chihuahua, the links of the chain shivering against one another with the motion.

Comfort flooded through him, warmth and ease and strength. He trusted this man. He *liked* him. Everything was going to be okay.

Projection, Chaz thought, through a wave of bliss. *He's a host. Well. If I'd been listing ways this could be worse, that would have been near the top.*

Awkwardly, Chaz fought through the emotion. There was no reason to trust and care about this man. This man who had drugged and chained him, who appeared to be laying in supplies for a siege. This man who looked strikingly like his mother; not a little like himself. Cheekbones, height, skin tone, shape of the nose and eyes--

He wasn't supposed to have any living relatives. Yet here, incontrovertibly, was one. A *host*.

Reyes would be fascinated. Maybe jammers did run in families.

"Are you comfortable?" the stranger asked.

It was the kind of question a victim heard from a power-reassurance rapist.

Chaz took a breath. First step, humanize yourself. Personalize. Build a connection. We're relatives, we have to be relatives. Start with that. "My name is Charles Villette. I'm from Nevada. I have friends there. I have a family. This was my grandparents' house. Did you grow up here?"

The stranger's eyes dilated--a sign of sudden interest, and Chaz desperately hoped it wasn't sexual. But what he said was, "She sent you back, didn't she? Did she send you to me?"

Addy, he'd said, when Chaz surprised him in the entry. No, not surprised; the chain had been ready. He'd been waiting. Waiting not for Chaz, but for Chaz's mother.

He didn't know Addy was dead, any more than Addy's parents had. Chaz had a sudden sickening set of ideas about why a young girl might decide streetwalking in Vegas was better than staying in her parent's house.

Don't let him control the conversation. "What's your name? Are we related?"

The stranger stared at him, and Chaz had a disorienting sense of pity and concern. His reflection in the mirror-tiled wall suggested that wasn't unreasonable. Chaz looked terrible; vomit smeared his face, and he couldn't quite straighten up--not because of the chain, but because his gut muscles were hunching him forwards in a protective comma. The stranger nodded, as if to himself, and turned the corner into the kitchen again.

If Chaz had been in the great room, he could have seen what was going on in there, but it didn't sound too bad. The rush and thump of water--waterboarding, that would be worse than being chained to a staple bolted to the concrete pad, wouldn't it?--into a plastic pail. "You know we are, baby boy. You're Addy's, aren't you?"

Fine. He was a relative, then. That wasn't as reassuring as it might have been, given what Chaz knew about family dynamics. But he cleared his throat and said, "You're Addy's brother?" He had to be. The resemblance was too close.

His mom had never mentioned a brother. But then, the only reason he'd known she had parents was because everyone did.

Establish the connection. Expand it. Humanize yourself. Anything to make them care for you. Stockholm syndrome worked both ways. Shared fire was a bond. Work it, reflect it back at him, make it shine.

Silence followed, so Chaz tried again. "I'm your nephew."

The laugh from the kitchen was unpleasant, and Chaz remembered that nobody was as likely to kill you as your own family.

"You've got no earthly kin anymore, child." The Relative--Chaz refused to think of him as his mother's brother--came back in, lugging the sloshing bucket. He set it down in the doorway, off to one side, and leaned against the

frame opposite. "The daughters of men are weak and corrupt in their flesh. Full of treachery. It matters not if they are pure or impure; every one is a whore in her heart. What did your mother, the whore, tell you of me?"

Nothing would be the wrong answer, though it would be satisfying. Chaz swallowed; the smell of the water hung heavy on the dusty air. "Can I have a drink, please?"

"*May* I," the Relative said, patiently, as one might instruct a child. Oh, he *had* to be kidding. One look at the man's face proved otherwise, though; it was stern and calm, commanding.

"*May* I have a drink?" Chaz asked. Cement dust gritted between his bare feet and the tile. He needed water, and if he could get the man to care for him, that was a connection, too. "Please? I'm very thirsty."

The Relative studied Chaz narrow-eyed. "When were you born?"

A connection was a connection. He'd rather have water. "1982."

"What day?"

"October 31st. Halloween. Isn't that funny? When were you born?"

The Relative only smiled. "Tell what Addy said on me."

Stall. Hafidha and Falkner knew where he was. They knew when he was supposed to be home. The team would be coming for him in three days, four at the outside. He just had to stay alive that long.

Chaz tried not to think about water, about the taste of vomit still caking his mouth, the yellow bile drying in flakes around his lips. "What's your name?"

"God sent her a messenger, baby boy, and she denied him, didn't she? William. William is my name, and you know it."

Bucket swinging from his hand, he crossed the space so fast Chaz barely had time to flinch away. The bucket hit the floor just out of Chaz's reach, sloshing over. Then the Relative's foot was on the chain, and Chaz was on his knees, hard, his hands pinned an inch from the floor.

The Relative had a rag. He hooked the bucket closer, and Chaz pulled away as hard as he could. The Relative had all the leverage, though, and Chaz found himself dull-witted, as if drunk, unable to think how to resist.

"It's okay, baby boy. Nobody's going to hurt you." He wet the rag, keeping his weight on the chain. "Shhh," he said. "Just let me take care of you."

Said it, or crooned it, and pushed Chaz's hair from his face, and scrubbed the strings and crusts of vomit away.

Inasmuch as he had a choice, Chaz let him do it. And when he was done, before he stepped back and took the bucket away, Chaz lifted his face and asked, "May I have a drink, please?"

The Relative looked at him, and looked at the bucket. "It'll only tie you longer to weakness and the body."

Oh, God, thought Chaz. *I hope so.* "Please."

The Relative chewed his lip, frowning. He grunted, tossed the rag away, scrubbed his hands on his pants, bent down, and scooped up water in his palms. "Drink," he said, and offered the cupped hands to Chaz.

The smell of the water was chalky, mineral. Limestone water, sweet and hard as hell. Chaz was too dry to salivate, but his eyes and nose stung. "May I have a cup?"

"Here's water," the Relative said. It dripped between his fingers, spattering the floor. "Drink."

Drink from his palm, like a trusting dog. Chaz imagined the taste of water, of salty skin. His gorge rose up his throat again, and he turned his head and gagged, though nothing came.

Beside him, the Relative let the water splash from his hands back into the bucket. "You'll drink when you get thirsty enough, I guess," he said. "Or if you don't get thirsty, that means something too." He bent down and tossed the rag to where Chaz could reach it. "Mop up that puke on the floor. You'll feel better if you don't have to lie in it."

When the Relative's steps faded away, Chaz examined the rag. He found a clean corner. But there wasn't enough moisture to be sucked out of it to put him to the trouble of swallowing.

*

It seemed William Villette was an early riser. Chaz heard him moving in the back bedrooms while the light seeping into the house looked filtered through

charcoal: gray, and cool. The Relative whistled softly to himself, an old lullaby.

Black and bay, dapple and grey,
Coach and six little horses,
Hush-a-bye, don't you cry,
Go to sleepy little baby.

Chaz knew that song from his mother, too. Complete with the second verse, which went:

Way down yonder, down in the meadow,
Lies a poor little lamby,
The bees and the butterflies peckin' out its eyes,
The poor little thing cryin' mammy.

The things people will sing to their children.

The melody came with an odd little flush of contentment, a bowl-of-oranges-sunny-morning satisfaction Chaz knew wasn't his own. Leakage from the gamma; why he was so smugly pleased to have Chaz in chains in the dining room was something else to worry about. However, that and the earlier projections told Chaz something about the nature of the manifestation. One of the mind-control ones, involving serotonin and oxytocin. An empath-in-reverse.

He wondered which of his grandparents had had the interest in gospel music and creepy-ass cradle songs, and tried not to think about the rumbling of his stomach, or how badly he needed a toilet. And a toothbrush. And a big plate of scrambled eggs, toast, corned beef hash and potatoes. He rubbed his arms against his body, trying to chafe some heat into his skin. Soon he would be as hot as anyone could desire, and sweating. And needing water more and more.

The beige plastic bucket still stood beside the kitchen doorway. Chaz thought he could smell the water. Stale, now, not as sweet. He was losing the aroma as the roses outside warmed up and released fragrance, and the scent of char lay over everything. When the sun got higher, the light would be dyed orange by the distant fires. It got that way in Vegas, sometimes, and the whole valley would smell like a woodstove.

Okay, maybe he was tempting fate in saying so, but things could be worse. He hadn't been left to starve, for one thing. He was cold, and soon he'd be hot, but it could be winter. In North Dakota. In an unheated house.

The thought made him smile. Just a tiny twitch of the corner of his mouth, but every bit helped. The hardest part was staying brave, and staying yourself. Not letting the identification process take hold. The Relative hadn't shown any signs of sadism yet. Just religious delusions. Hafidha knew where Chaz had gone. If he could stay alive for two or three days, Falkner and Reyes and the gang would just come and fetch him. And give him holy hell about leaving his gun in the glove box.

And he'd be happy to have it. Piece of cake. Things could be much, much worse.

To prove it to himself, he started a list, visualizing it on blue-ruled yellow paper, era: second grade.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1. It could be winter in North Dakota.
2. Waterboarding.
3. Rats.
4. Snakes.
5. Death.

A door opened, a toilet flushed. The sound of running water was not music to Chaz's ears. Between the dehydration and concentrating his urine, he would probably wind up with kidney stones. Something else to anticipate...

"Uncle William?" Personalize. Connect. Make yourself somebody the hostage-taker knows. There were flow charts and decision trees, and he'd memorized them all.

The Relative appeared at the end of the hall, dragging a comb through his wet hair. He still had plenty of it, and male-pattern baldness tended to be inherited on the female line. *Well, there's some good news.* Chaz was proud; his banter might only be internal, but it didn't sound hysterical to him.

"Morning, baby boy. Did you sleep?"

Chaz rattled his chains, standing. He might look more inoffensive sitting, but standing when the Relative entered the room should be seen as a sign of respect. "Not very well, I'm afraid. Could I, I mean, may I use the bathroom, please?"

That might get his hands free, or at least the chain unhooked from the staple. It was worth a try, and if the Relative would let him clean up the vomit, he probably wouldn't want Chaz lying in urine and feces. *See? Another way it could be worse.*

Also, Chaz needed to figure out the Relative's agenda and what drove it, so he could manipulate it. He had to keep him talking.

The staring made him uncomfortable. The Relative turned his head, his cheeks and lips working as if he considered spitting, and jerked his head hard to the side. "I'll get you a bucket," he said, and Chaz's heart sank.

*

By midmorning, the drone of bees in the rosebushes outside was loud enough to make his spinning head throb. Dehydration. Caffeine withdrawal. Any minute now, he'd start seeing migraine auras.

He'd located the source of the cloying scent; one pane in the west window was broken out, so cleanly you had to look for the lack of reflection to see its absence. Chaz had to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth to lick dry lips. He was sure the Relative heard his stomach grumbling; William had rummaged around in the kitchen for a while, making sounds of tearing wrappers and crunching like mice nibbling corn. He set his plate on the glass-topped table, and sat down to eat three peanut butter sandwiches and drink two glasses of reconstituted sweetened condensed milk. The smell was enough to make Chaz gnaw his cheek. He would have been swallowing saliva by the mouthful if he weren't losing so much moisture to perspiration that he couldn't have spit if his life depended on it.

He wished he could get his hands up to wipe the sweaty cords of hair from his eyes, but because of the way they were chained, all he could do was rub his forehead against his knuckles or shake it aside, and it fell right back where it had come from.

The Relative scraped his chair across the floor and got up to take his plate into the kitchen, and Chaz wished he could lean back against a wall. His

back hurt; his ass hurt; and his arms and shoulders didn't bear thinking about. His wrists and ankles were already dotted with flea bites. He tried supporting his arms with his knees. That was a little better.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1. It could be winter in North Dakota.
2. Waterboarding.
3. Rats.
4. Snakes.
5. Poison.
6. Roaches.
7. I could be sitting in pee. Or vomit.
8. Concussion/head trauma/brain damage.
9. Death.

When the Relative came back, he had something brown and crumbled on a piece of foil cupped in his hand. Chaz sat with his outstretched arms resting on his upraised knees. He caught the scent of honey and cinnamon, and his stomach clenched audibly, like a child grabbing after a sweet. He looked up, his head turned as much by welling emotions of proprietary pride as the nearness of food.

Oh, God. The Relative *adored* him. And all he wanted was for Chaz to love him back--

The Relative hunkered down. "I brought you something. A gift. Something sweet." Delicately, he lifted a bit of food--trail mix?--between his fingers.

Chaz swallowed, and asked, "What is it?"

William laid the crumb of food back on the pile, and turned up one corner of the foil wrapper under it to read aloud. "Oats. Honey. Almonds. Salt. Peanut butter. Hydrogenated vegetable oil. High fructose corn syrup. Puffed rice with soy protein. Soy lecithin. Cinnamon. Other natural flavors. Sweets for the sweet. Won't you eat, angel?"

Chaz closed his eyes. *Oh, God. My granola bars. I wonder what he's done with my* gun.

He just had to stay alive, and the team would come get him. And Brady would never let him hear the end of it. Was there anything worse than a cop losing his gun?

He opened his mouth.

The Relative laid a half-cubic-inch segment of granola bar on his tongue like a communion wafer, and Chaz pushed it between his teeth, crushed, and chewed, trying to work up enough saliva to swallow.

His mouth was sanded with the rubble of rolled oats and almonds, about as likely to make it down his throat as the cement dust on the floor. "Poor angel," the Relative said, and set the crumpled granola bar on the floor. "You've got yourself in a state, haven't you? Just like your mama. She'd hurt herself fighting what was good for her, and she taught you some bad habits. But that's all done now. I've got you, and you're safe."

Chaz thought if he tried to speak, he'd choke. Maybe if he held the food in his mouth long enough, it would soften, and--

"Scoot over here," the Relative said, and Chaz might have challenged him, but there was no point. He checked himself, though, to make sure he was thinking about why he was obeying, rather than just obeying because the Relative was in a position of power. He was obeying because he needed to build the Relative's trust in him; because he needed to establish and maintain that human connection; because there was no percentage in appearing defiant until he was ready to fight.

The Relative wanted him sitting, and at the end of his length of chain. Bad news; it meant the Relative had thought about the possibility that Chaz could drop to the floor and get extra range, if the Relative came up on him when he was standing.

Chaz wondered where he was keeping the key.

"Come further," the Relative said, and Chaz would have argued--he'd have to turn back toward the staple and extend his hands to move any farther from it, but he had to stay alive. Two more days. Maybe three. That was all.

He slid around in a half-circle and obeyed.

"Stay there," the Relative said, pleased, and walked away. Footsteps into the kitchen, the sound of sloshing water and then the sound of the tap. Footsteps

returning. The square water bucket landed on the broken tile three feet away.

The Relative wasn't going to give him a cup this time, either, and Chaz thought he had steeled himself against that inevitability. But when the Relative slid the bucket just out of Chaz's reach and crouched beside it, and said, "Turn your head, angel," Chaz's gorge heaved.

Chaz did not like being touched, unless he had a say in who was doing the touching. He did not like being dependent; he hadn't since he was eight years old, a problem foster shuffled from house to house around Las Vegas. He'd been pawed, controlled, told he didn't know what he wanted or needed--by foster parents, social workers, pitying teachers, child psychologists. The sort of people who loved a victim, as long as the victim was suitably indebted by their charity.

If Chaz could pick one word to be engraved on his tombstone, he hoped it would be *ungrateful*.

Now the Relative crouched before him, and lifted water dripping in the bowl of his two cupped hands, and Chaz felt the skin about to crawl off his underlying tissues at the prospect of putting his lips to the water in that man's palms.

Maybe the tombstone word should be *stubborn*.

Slow down, cowboy. Don't be thinking about your tombstone now. Drink the water. Do what you have to do, and stay alive. Two days. Maybe three.

Teeth still blurry with last night's bile, he put his mouth to the Relative's hands and drank. The Relative's hands came around his face like the doors of a cage.

They're going to find me. They have to find me alive.

Alive.

The water--oh, God, the water. The first three mouthfuls went down so fast he barely tasted it; he had to sink his teeth into his lip to keep from licking the last drops from the hollow of the Relative's palm. It was so good it left him lightheaded, and when he tipped his head back he gasped. "May I have more, please?" he asked, praying it was the right question.

The Relative smiled, and Chaz, if he had been standing, would have wobbled under the weight of pride, triumph, adoration. "You can learn to be a good boy," he said. "It isn't your fault she didn't raise you right."

Don't you talk about my mother that way, you son of a bitch. Chaz swallowed hard--this time it didn't hurt--and managed to keep his indignant response behind his teeth somehow. He needed the water more than he needed to bite the Relative's hand. *Sorry, Mom*.

His mom would understand. She, of all people, would understand that you did what you had to do to stay alive, and pride didn't enter into it.

Isn't, the Relative said. Not *ain't.* Chaz's mom had been particular about his manner of speech, too, even though she tended to slip and say "ain't" when she was tired or emotional. The family--*his* family--took pride in appearing well-spoken. It was something they valued.

The Relative dipped more water in his big spider-fingered hands, and again, Chaz lowered his head and drank, the Relative's crooked thumbs coming forward to steady on his cheeks. This time, he tried to take the mouthfuls slowly, to savor them. He didn't know how much the Relative would give him, and he needed every drop. The water had a distinctive flavor, sweet but mineral-heavy, not Las Vegas's simple limestone acridness. Chaz tasted the salt of the Relative's sweat. His mouth touched the Relative's palms, and though he had expected it he jerked back, shuddering.

A sharp moment of disappointment, followed by warmth, praise and satisfaction. The Relative smiled at him, and dipped more water. "Drink, and be refreshed."

Even now that the thirst was no longer killing him, he gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, lowered his head and drank. He needed the water and the strength it brought. His hair fell into the palmful of water; strands got between his teeth. He couldn't do anything about it. And when he was done, holding the last swallow in his mouth to savor it, the Relative reached around into his back pocket and brought out a dark blue plastic comb. Slowly, gently, careful of Chaz's ears, he combed his draggled hair out of his face. "You need a haircut, boy."

When he was done, he put the comb away, and touched Chaz's eyelids, nose, cheek lightly with his fingertips. Chaz had never felt such pride, such

possession. A sociopathic trait, that need to dominate others, that Old-Testament paternalism. At an extreme, it externalized in a serial killer's desire to completely control his victims.

Chaz was going to have to use that. If he was going to live.

More water, cupped and presented. *Drink it now; you* will *need it later*. Chaz lowered his head to the offering, while the Relative bent over him and murmured tenderly. "That's my angel. That's my baby boy. You'll be all right now. You're safe. Your papa's taking care of you now, and Addy can't take my boy away from me again."

Chaz choked, spraying water. And when he looked up into the Relative's eyes, saw nothing but absolute conviction, and love.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Day 2

Act III

He'd dozed off. Oh, hell.

The migraine and the ache in his back, arms, and legs should have kept him awake. Heat and hunger and keyed-up exhaustion trumped them. The body said sleep, and wait for the torment to be over. Sleep, and conserve your strength. But now he'd lost track of the Relative. He couldn't afford that.

The house was quiet. Could the Relative be so quiet Chaz couldn't hear him? Couldn't *feel* him?

A whole new meaning to the expression, "Too much sharing." It didn't seem as funny as he thought it should be.

The sun shone straight in the dining room window, and the mirrored wall reflected it. He'd been right about the orange tint from the smoke. It was good to be right. You got a little serotonin kick from it.

Keep it up; solving problems increased morale. Morale was all he had.

Even filtered by the jungle of the roses and the smoke, the sun was like light focused through a magnifying glass, the heat pummeling. Sweat pasted his shirt to his skin; the salt itched on his chest and back and under his arms. In the humidity, the cloth wouldn't dry, not the way it would in the Mojave. When the sun went down, he'd be shivering in his wet shirt.

He was thirsty again; when he swallowed, the lining of his throat rasped against itself. He had a sense-memory of the bits of granola bar: sugar, cinnamon, the crunching between his teeth. His stomach clutched at nothing.

Hunger sharpened the mind, up to a point. He was afraid he might be a little past that.

The manacles seemed heavier. He knew it was his arms weakening, but he couldn't shake the idea that they were being pulled toward the floor.

All right, enough of the catalog of grievances. Get back to working the profile.

Chaz's mother's brother was a gamma, organized, possibly religious-delusional. How long had that been going on? It would be a good reason to

get the hell out of East Texas. Especially since he seemed to hold a grudge against his sister. Anger-retaliation behavior. What, besides chaining her to the dining room floor, had he meant to do?

Don't answer that. But he had to, didn't he? If this were a random anomalous crime, nothing to do with him, he'd need to answer that. The personal connection made no difference.

The Relative was delusional. Everything in the streaming data of his emotions told Chaz that. He'd cast Chaz as his child as part of laying claim to him. Would it be better to go along with the delusion, or try to reassert the real relationship?

Chaz was tired, and hot, and his back muscles burned from sitting unsupported. It would be easier to lie on the floor.

No. Sit up. Find something to keep awake with. Song lyrics.

"I am a poor wayfaring stranger," he sang under his breath, his voice cracking and rasping in his dry throat.

Traveling through this world of woe
But there's no sickness, toil, or danger
In that bright land to which I go.

He wouldn't mind toil. He loved his job. He hunted monsters and saved lives. That was who he was, that was all right, and even the danger, within limits, had never stopped him. It wouldn't again, once he got out of here. Three days at most.

The sound of the front door knob turning brought him alert, breath coming shallow. From an analytical distance, he catalogued the stress reactions. It wouldn't be long before his body started to habituate to the adrenaline dump, to harden off to the stress.

The Relative passed through the archway and on into the kitchen, carrying a grocery bag and a plastic sack with a drug store logo on it.

"Uncle William?"

No answer; only the crackle of bags, cabinets opening, clattering, water running.

"Uncle William? May I have a drink, please?" And food, and the damned bucket if he couldn't have the actual bathroom.

The Relative came around the corner into the dining room. The drug store bag dangled in one of his bony long-fingered hands. His shoulders were loose and relaxed, and his face wore a stern and settled calm. Chaz tried to brace himself, but there wasn't any way to brace against that tide of feeling: satisfaction, pride, excitement, wonder. *Not mine!* But he couldn't say it aloud, and it didn't lessen the flood.

"You know Genesis, baby boy? Did Addy teach you your Bible?" the Relative asked. "In Genesis, there's the story of how the angels of the Lord looked on the daughters of men, and found them beautiful in their sight. But the daughters of men were flesh and not the fire of angels, and their children, the nephilim, were mighty, but only men, and tempted to wickedness. The world fell, because the flesh of the daughters of men was weak and impure."

Not quite how I remember it, Chaz thought. "Uncle William, if I could please have some water--"

Pride and wonder. Chaz was dizzy with thirst and emotion. "But you'll be pure, baby boy. You'll shed the clay Addy put on you." His mom's name came lapped in righteous anger. "I'll see to it there's no taint of the whore left in you." He crossed the room and set the bag on the glass-topped table in the corner.

Chaz hadn't realized how many examples of ritual purification of victims he knew from case histories. Not useful; well, not unless scaring himself to death was useful. Better to be scared by what was actually happening.

And that wasn't so bad. The Relative didn't seem to want him to starve or die of thirst. He wasn't torturing him. Chaz knew he could bargain for what he needed, even if, so far, he hated the terms.

Two days, three at the outside. He might improve the conditions. Hell, he might even get away. He could do this. Reyes was going to flay him verbally, but really, how could Chaz have known he had a dangerous gamma uncle squatting in his house?

The Relative was calm and certain when acting from his delusion. But the anger that slipped out of him at the mention of Chaz's mom--it was a crack, it was something the delusion didn't account for. Delicately, now, poke at it, ask without challenging. "Why do you say my mom was a whore?"

The Relative's hands hovered over the bag. "Where is your mama, baby boy?"

"My mother loved me."

William shrugged, fretting his fingertips against the thighs of his trousers. His mom had had a nervous gesture just like that. "Of course she does. Addy isn't a bad girl. She just hasn't accepted her Lord. God is hard; he makes demands. But if she loves you, well, I love you--" And he did; Chaz couldn't deny that seasick possessive love. He felt it every time the Relative looked at him. "--and I'm right here, baby boy." He fished an apple from the pocket of his flannel shirt, polished it on the sleeve, and took a bite.

Chaz's mouth watered at the crunch. Not as desperately thirsty as he had been, then. "My name is Charles--"

Crunch, crunch. Swallow. The Relative's lips were shiny with the juice. "I know your name, child. Where's your mama?" He stared at Chaz. His mom hadn't been so tall, and her bones had been lighter. But still.

"She's dead," Chaz said, and watched the apple roll as if in slow motion from the Relative's hand.

Two hard breaths. Then the Relative leaned forward, hands flattened on the glass tabletop. His face in the mirror tiles was blank. "Addy's dead?"

Oh, crap. Do *not* let the suspect direct the conversation. He knew the Relative hadn't known. He could have held the information back for when he needed it. One of his pieces taken off the board. "Uncle William--"

"Dead--"

"She died when I was seven," Chaz said, thinking, *If that was an error, use it. My mother is the crack in his delusion. This is the tool.* "I was raised in foster care."

The Relative stepped back. And again, until he was almost in the dark hallway, and Chaz was drowning with him. This wasn't projection; it was

leakage--quick brutal flickers of grief and disbelief and wrath, a fury so intense Chaz nearly gagged. Then the Relative's expression firmed and his chin came up. "Of course," he said. "She denied God, denied the messenger he sent her, and died in her denial. I should have known. If I had not fallen--"

He shook his head. Hard, as if shaking off sweat, face screwing up in agony. Chest heaving, while Chaz laid his hands across his knees and tried to make himself small.

The Relative's eyes opened and he stared at Chaz, shoulders relaxing, though his breath still lifted his chest visibly with each gasp. "Oh baby boy," he said, all sorrow. "It's all right. I'll redeem myself in you."

Chaz could not have made himself any stiller, any smaller. *Oh. Shit.*

"She left you behind. And you came to me. Baby boy, she never told me. Little angel. Did you grow up all alone? I would have taken care of you."

Chaz sank under a tide of love, heavy as carpet. "Please, I--may I--" He couldn't remember what to ask for.

"Sshh. I'm going to take care of you."

The Relative fetched the water bucket from the kitchen. He set it down, cupped up a double handful of water, and held it under Chaz's chin. Chaz understood how animals could smell that and follow the smell for miles.

"Please, could--may I have a cup this time?"

The Relative's disappointment was, of course, palpable, and Chaz winced under it in spite of himself. The Relative let the water fall back in the bucket. The splash made Chaz's throat ache.

The Relative shook his head. "You've got some bad habits to unlearn, is all. She taught you some bad things. She couldn't help it. Didn't know any better herself. But it's okay now, papa's here."

"I'm your sister's son. You're my uncle." It was worth a try. Anything was.

With wet hands, the Relative brushed the sweaty hair off Chaz's forehead. The comfort of it shocked him. Frightened him. "You're thirsty, aren't you?"

"Yes. If I had a cup--"

"You have my hands. You will always have those, baby boy." He dipped out another double handful of water and held it out to Chaz.

He had to live. The real world still existed outside that house. He had to get back to it.

He lowered his face into the Relative's hands and felt his calloused fingertips against the skin of his throat and jaw. He shivered when the Relative's rough thumb stroked his cheek as he drank, when the Relative's proprietary love filled him like dirty water in a drowning man's lungs.

The Relative stood, lugged the bucket across the room, and sat down at the table. Chaz shifted and stretched his spine. "Our Savior was born of a virgin girl. You know the story?" The Relative took a box out of the plastic bag, then a smaller box. "God sent an angel to Mary. He called her Favored One, and said the power of God would cast its shadow over her. And Mary answered, 'Here I am, the Lord's slave.'"

The Relative wasn't projecting. But the whole room seemed to tremble under the weight of what he held back. Chaz denied his aching muscles, the craving in his stomach, the pounding in his head. He was a good hunter. Whatever it was, he could wait for it.

Next thing out of the bag: a ten-pack of syringes. Chaz looked again at the little box. He couldn't read the packaging, but it was the right size for a ten-milliliter vial. *God, let him not O.D. If he does, I starve to death.* Syringes, a vial of something--from a pharmacy? How did he *get* this stuff?

Oh, Chaz thought. *A projecting empath never has to worry about getting a ride home*. Somewhere there was a pharmacist who was still feeling the glow of helping a nice customer.

Maybe he'd moved, after all. The Relative turned to him and nodded. "Pull your knees up to your chest."

Again the decision tree, weighing obedience against the alternatives. Chaz drew his knees up, between his arms.

"That's a good boy. Now, put your feet on the bar."

He meant the bar between Chaz's wrists, the one the hasps were welded to. He had long arms. He had longer legs. "I don't think I can--"

"Come on, now, angel. If you do it, papa'll give you something nice."

Something to stay alive with, and he was going to stay alive, after all. Today was almost over. That meant two days, max, before the team showed up. He had to do it. The Relative wanted him to.

Chaz pulled his knees hard against his ribs, stretched his arms until he got his bare toes over the bar. The balls of his feet wouldn't go.

"That's my boy. Just a little more."

Happiness and pride and hope drugged him into pushing for one more inch.

The happiness and pride were inextricable from the pain of the manacles jammed into the bones of his hands by the pressure of his folded body. His shoulder joints screamed. Tendons and ligaments in his hip joints twisted. Sweat stung his eyes.

He'd done it to himself. He should have resisted. He should have been smarter. Stronger.

"That's my brave angel. It'll just be for a minute or so." The Relative turned back to the table, tore open the pack of syringes, opened the little box. Yes, a vial of something. *No, no, no, tell me it's not for me instead...* He opened the bigger box and took out a little glass tube with a stopper. Not a medical-supply test tube; maybe something from the craft department.

"When an angel of the Lord comes to her, child," the Relative continued, not looking up, "a good woman listens and obeys. Her heart is humble and glad, like Mary's." He drew a quantity of clear fluid out of the vial with the syringe and shot it into the glass tube, propped it in the corner of the box.

The year he turned six, Chaz's mom had read the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke to him on Christmas Eve. He could have read them himself, but it was more fun to share it, to accept it as a present. Besides, she didn't mind if he made comments, like, "If I were Zacharias, I wouldn't have believed it, either," which made her laugh.

The Relative pulled a length of rubber tubing out of the bag and tied it around his left biceps. Chaz would have relaxed if he could. *It's for him. Back to the original worry.* His neck ached from keeping his head raised to watch.

But the syringe was empty and the plunger depressed when the Relative pricked it into the humped vein inside his elbow. He released the tubing and drew the plunger. The syringe filled with blood, a red stain thick as milk. He pulled it, put it in his left hand, and licked his thumb and pressed it to the puncture, held it there while he shot the blood into the glass tube, pressed the stopper on one-handed, and shook the mixture.

"Your mama wasn't good. The Lord sent his angel to her, to cast his shadow over her, and she wasn't glad. But the Lord's will is done whether we like it or not, baby boy. Where would you be if that wasn't true?"

When his mom got to the story of the Annunciation, her voice had faltered. She'd read, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord," and stopped. "Mary must have been so scared," she said, in a voice smaller than the one she read to him in.

The Relative refilled the syringe with the contents of the glass tube. He retrieved the rubber tubing, walked over to Chaz, crouched, and pushed Chaz's rolled-up sleeve over his biceps.

No.

Chaz tried to pull away, but only lurched over. The Relative pulled him upright again and bathed him in love and sorrow. "I fell, baby boy. God must have known I would, when he sent me down from Heaven. It was her fault. But you'll redeem her. Pure angel's blood will wash her taint out of you. Your papa may have fallen, but he can still make you an angel like he was."

He fetched the syringe.

"Please, don't do this--"

The Relative stood behind Chaz, keeping him from falling over by pinning him between his knees. He pressed Chaz's head down, half-smothering him against the fabric of his own jeans. Chaz felt him lean forward. "Now, don't move, baby boy. Don't want the needle to break off in you."

The Relative was an angel. The angel of the Annunciation. Who'd come to his mom, and been rejected, but who'd cast the shadow over her anyway, because his will was God's and not to be denied. Chaz couldn't breathe.

He'd raped her. That's why Addy Villette left home.

Oh, Mom. I'm sorry. I won't give you back to him, I promise. You got away, and I can keep you safe.

Glory. Exultation. The needle stick. All at once. The threat of HIV, hepatitis, bacteria--new pollutants for already-tainted blood. The Relative had contaminated Chaz from inside long before this. From the beginning.

He's my father.

Oh, lord, why did she keep *me?*

*

Blinding headache, day two.

Again, Chaz hadn't meant to sleep, but exhaustion and something closer to comfort, a blanket and a pillow--his reward for good behavior, sayeth the Relative--had claimed him. He'd gone under fast. *It doesn't matter*, he told himself, as dawn glowed pink through his eyelids, and his knees, shoulders, hips throbbed with inflammation from the twisted position of the day before. *It wasn't a failure. The meatware is only being sensible.*

And if the first day of his captivity had proved anything, it was that vigilance wouldn't help him. He couldn't physically prevent the Relative from doing anything the Relative wanted to do. His hope lay in negotiation, the appearance of cooperation, deception, and stalling.

In the profile.

He would have to play the trickster. Fortunately, it wasn't a new role. Chaz Villette wasn't done for yet.

Not easy with his hands bound into what was essentially one big inflexible paw, but he'd managed to improvise a sleeping bag by folding the wool blanket so two-thirds of it lay doubled beneath him. Between that and the sofa cushion the Relative had given him for a pillow, he was tolerably warm. *Thank you, Brady, for that survival tip, and for the information that most body heat is lost by conduction rather than radiation. Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

When the team got Chaz back, the first thing he was going to do was shower for an hour. And then he was going to eat about three steak dinners.

And ice cream. And then he was going to buy Brady a beer, even if he would only drink Coors Light.

"*Silver bullets are for werewolves, man. It wouldn't kill you to drink a Sierra Nevada."* The corners of Chaz's mouth twitched as he anticipated the familiar arguments. *"I'm just not comfortable giving Coors my hard-earned money."*

Brady would answer, *"It may be your money, but it's my mouth. Do I complain about buying that sissy stuff you drink?"*

One more day. Maybe two. That was all it would take, and they would be here for him. There would be the scary bit with the hostage negotiation, Reyes would figure the Relative out in about seventeen seconds flat--it had only taken Chaz a couple of hours--and the worst Chaz would have to face was six months of HIV prophylaxis and everybody on the team knowing where he came from.

He minded that less than he minded knowing it himself.

Oh God. As long as nobody told Frost.

Frost would have questions.

So Chaz lay supine on the tile-over-cement floor and wondered how long the Relative would let him get away with not opening his eyes. Dehydration and caffeine withdrawal and hunger might be killing his head, but at least he didn't have to urinate yet, which meant he could preserve his dignity and this fragile moment of peace a little longer.

He needed to buy that time. To preserve the integrity of his personality, his purpose, his ability to maintain separation from the Relative, he needed to use every second of downtime he got to reinforce those things. The Relative would be working on chipping away Chaz's autonomy, making him complicit and wearing him down.

It was a siege, and Chaz was the defender. The castle was strong, but not impregnable. He would have to shore up where the Relative sapped, buttress where he brought his ladders and siege engines to bear. He would have to keep fighting until reinforcements arrived. He pictured Reyes on a white horse, like Gandalf, charging down a hillside to scatter the orcs, and tried not to laugh and draw the Relative's attention.

In a survival situation, it was important to keep one's spirits up. So while the drone of insects increased and the morning grew hot and bright, Chaz worked on his list because he couldn't sing.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1. It could be winter in North Dakota.
2. Waterboarding.
3. Rats.
4. Snakes.
5. Roaches.
6. I could be sitting in pee. Or vomit.
7. He could be nailing parts of me to things.
8. Poison.
9. Concussion/head trauma/brain damage.
10. Third-degree burns.
11. Death.

In the back of the house, he heard bedsprings creak, and his pulse rate jumped twenty beats per minute. The already-familiar sounds of William's morning routine followed, and then his footsteps in the hall. Chaz swallowed hard and brought his hands up, under the blankets, so they lay on his chest. The manacles cut his wrists when he moved. His bones were bigger than Addy's would have been.

Oh, Mom, he thought. *Did anybody ever tell you how brave you were?* Tears stung his eyes; he would have cried for her, but he couldn't stand to have the Relative see him weep. He drew breath between gritted teeth and sat up, shedding the blanket as the Relative paused by the edge of the circle defined by Chaz's chain and set the bucket down softly. Chaz pressed his knuckles to his eyes, pretending sleepy helplessness. Three days of itching stubble rasped the backs of his hands.

"Morning, angel," the Relative said, while Chaz tried not to gag on the tide of affection and pride and anticipation that filled the room. He had been a good boy, and the Relative was pleased. Chaz wondered how long it would

take for him to be pleased that the Relative was pleased, and pushed the thought away. One more day. Maybe two. "Did you sleep well?"

"Better, thank you," Chaz said, doing his best to sound as if it didn't come through gritted teeth. He rose. He was getting the hang of standing up without using his hands.

"You do your business. I have something to fetch. I won't be a moment." The Relative nudged the bucket within Chaz's reach and stepped back. For a moment, Chaz thought of using it as a weapon, but he wasn't Daniel Brady, trained killer, and he had no idea how you'd incapacitate somebody with a Rubbermaid pail. And even if he did, he was still chained to the floor.

He took advantage of the few moments of privacy to put it to its intended purpose, instead. What urine he passed was rank, a disheartening shade of orange. You could drink it, if you got desperate enough; it was sterile from the body, something that had kept a certain percentage of the victims of seventeenth century bladder surgery alive long enough to heal. That would be worse, too, being cut for the stone. He should put it on his list.

But urine was also full of toxins, and the sorts of things the body preferred passed through rather than recycled. He'd hold out, and hope the Relative meant to give him water. William wanted him alive, dependent. He wanted Chaz to rely on him, to love him. Food and water would be forthcoming, as long as Chaz didn't give him any reason to withhold.

He pushed the bucket away with his toe, and bruised himself zipping his fly. The home-made manacles did not want his wrists to twist, even a little.

When the Relative returned, he had something in his hands, and Chaz cringed, remembering the needle. The Relative nudged the bucket further away, as if the smell distressed him, and gestured Chaz to his knees.

Deep breath. One, two. Chaz knelt. He didn't feel like being *put* there with a foot on his chain again, and so he chose to obey. A conscious and aware choice, manipulating his captor. That was all right. That was still a decision.

"Open your mouth, baby boy," the Relative said, and Chaz again did as instructed. Carefully, the Relative put a foot on Chaz's chain--not jerking him this time, just holding him in place--and squatted down before him as if

before a child. The thing the Relative had held half-concealed was a toothbrush, the bristles wet and smeared with gel toothpaste.

Gently, the Relative cradled his face in one palm, stroking Chaz's cheek lightly. The thin stubble of his beard caught on the calluses and whorls of the Relative's fingertips. "Good boy," he murmured. "Baby boy. Little angel. I'm so sorry, sweetheart. So sorry you grew up alone. I would have taken care of you. But it's okay now, papa's here and papa's going to make you an angel. The angel I should have been, if it weren't for that whore. You're going to be a good boy for papa now, aren't you?"

"Yes," Chaz said, trying to let the lies and endearments wash over him, through him, unheard. *In one ear and out the other*. He should be profiling, memorizing, working. But he couldn't stand to listen. "I'm going to be good."

The Relative's hand tightened on his chin. "Ah ah," he said. "Mouth open."

Chaz swallowed, hard, and opened wide. He closed his eyes, and felt the Relative slide the brush into his mouth.

Careful brushing, gentle, properly done in small circles. The flavor of toothpaste choked him. *One more day. One more,* while William crooned in his ear, breath stirring his hair. "Your papa's right here, angel. I'll always be here for you now."

That's what I'm afraid of. But Chaz held his tongue, and suffered his teeth to be brushed. The Relative brought him water in the clean bucket, and he rinsed and spit into a bowl the Relative held for him. Then he was allowed to drink his fill from the Relative's hands, slowly, a cupped palmful at a time, asking politely for each as the last was finished.

It did not get any easier, and he was glad. Chaz did not want to be tamed.

The Relative dispensed with the buckets, and took the cushion and the blanket and folded them on the table against need. Then he came and sat on the floor close by Chaz with a bag of apples and a jar of peanut butter, feeding them each alternately from his fingers by biting pieces from the apples and dipping them in the jar.

The apples were full of juice, though the lingering effect of the toothpaste made the first bites bitter. The peanut butter was store-brand and cloying.

Chaz ate everything the Relative offered, wishing there were more.

"Would your momma do this for you, baby boy?"

My mom never would have chained me to the floor, William. "My mom loved me," Chaz said, his mouth sticky with peanut butter, knowing as he gave the Relative the words that he shouldn't have said it.

"Of course she did. No one in the world couldn't love a baby boy like you, and you should be loyal to her. Honor thy father and thy mother, baby boy. But she gave you up, didn't she? And she hid you from me. So she couldn't have loved you as much as I do. As the Lord does."

Chaz blinked, wondering if he had misheard. Then realized, no. He had lied without meaning to, played into the Relative's delusion of Addy's wickedness. *I was raised in foster care.*

In the Relative's world, Addy had abandoned not only himself, and God--but their son.

I'm going to have to play to that. It puts us on the same team, the Relative and me.

Jesus, Chaz thought. *And the evening and the morning were the second day.*

Day 3

Act IV

That night, the evening of the third day, Chaz earned his blanket and pillow through consistent polite obedience, like a child who does not wish to give a parent any excuse to withhold a treat. He even managed not to fight the needle. It was easier, this time, knowing it was coming, knowing that at least the Relative wouldn't be doing anything *new* and horrible. *The devil you know*, he thought blackly, while the Relative performed his alchemy with syringe and anticoagulant and tube. It would be all right. It was nothing Chaz hadn't endured before.

For his reward Chaz was given a drink of water and half an almond Hershey bar, bloomed with white from being stored in the refrigerator. After the Relative went to bed, Chaz lay in his blanket, thinking.

Chaz never got enough to eat once his mom died. None of his foster families--who, after all, got a fixed income supplement for his care--could believe a seemingly healthy kid needed that much food. After he had been endlessly tested--for Type 1 diabetes and intestinal parasites and a malfunctioning thyroid--the doctors gave up and let nature take its course. His equally endless sessions with the child psychologists often concentrated on what they referred to as his "eating disorder."

Chaz had bargained with his fosters: I don't really need new school clothes, new sneakers, a haircut--could we spend that on food instead? He stole sticks of margarine from refrigerators, a habit that probably kept him alive, as well as ensuring that he never stayed in one foster home for long. When it got bad, he descended to scamming kids in school for their lunches. He hated doing it even though he told himself they were going hungry for an afternoon, and he was going hungry *all the time*.

He wondered if anyone on the team knew he could shark three-card monte.

He would have starved in any city in the world except Las Vegas. But Vegas was the home of the all-you-can-eat breakfast, the nine-dollar sixteen-ounce prime-rib dinner, the holy grail of the casino buffet. For a while, when he was fostered at the ranch estate near Decatur, the guys at the Texas Station Buffet line had known him by name.

God, he loved that town.

He'd memorized a lot of calorie charts and nutrition tables when he was younger. Memorizing was easy for him, and it helped him make sure he got as many calories and vitamins as he could.

He knew he wasn't getting enough food now. If only he could eat the stink of those roses, or the orange light and the scent of smoke.

Apples plus peanut butter plus chocolate, something around five or six hundred calories. Less than a third of what a normal person his weight needed for a sedentary day. For Chaz, it was the equivalent of that normal person having nothing to eat for two and a half days, and it was the second such day in a row. He could feel his jeans loose on his hipbones already, the extra space in the shoulders of his shirt.

There was food in the house; the Relative burned calories as fast as Chaz did. But Chaz didn't get to eat as often as the Relative did, or as much. Because the Relative was trying to turn Chaz into an angel. To burn him clean of the earthly clay that the Relative's rape of Chaz's mother had imprisoned him in. Angels do not eat or drink. Angels don't need to eliminate into plastic buckets.

Chaz wasn't used to being hungry anymore. In two more days, if he couldn't talk the Relative into giving him more to eat, this was going to get ugly.

He needed a scam.

He would have thought the wrenching of his stomach would keep him awake, but it wasn't so. He was still thinking about that as sleep claimed him.

*

In the cold between light and sunrise in the morning of the third day, Chas woke thinking, *Today.*

Today. Maybe tomorrow. They'll come.

Somewhere, a time-zone east, Hafidha and Falkner--the early risers--were already in the office. Hafidha was sitting down at her desk, booting her computers. Falkner was bringing her a cup of coffee, because Falkner believed that good bosses took care of their reports, not the other way around.

And at some point over the course of the morning, Hafidha would appear at the door of Falkner's office, and she would say--

*

"Es?" said Hafidha, from Falkner's doorway. Amazing how much urgency could be put into a syllable. "Have you heard from Chaz?"

Falkner turned from the neat tower of jacketed case files on her desk. "No."

Hafidha's eyes were wide beneath the tumble of her braids. Falkner had been a parent long enough to recognize the "help me" expression, even on a thirty-year-old woman's face. A woman who hardly ever needed help with anything. Falkner hid her own inward twitch of alarm.

"He isn't back. He was supposed to be back last night."

"Maybe his plane got delayed."

"Chaz late without calling? Doesn't happen. He's a Post-Industrial boy. He can push buttons. And the girl he was supposed to have dinner with Saturday said he never called, never showed." Her left hand was yanking the rings off her right hand and putting them back on, one at a time, over and over. "He's not answering his cell. He's not answering his home number. There's no email."

They had good instincts, everyone on the team. "All right. Have a look."

Hafidha lunged off.

Falkner looked again at the case files. Then she turned to follow Hafidha. She had instincts, too.

Hafidha was already pulling up screens of information when Falkner got to the computer room. "Okay, he must have rented a car. Companies that rent out of Tyler Pounds Regional Airport...hah, only four. Nope, not there, aaand not that one..."

The information went by too fast; a rental car company logo, a list scrolling by, another logo and list. Falkner caught her breath. It was Lau who'd first called the manifestation HafidhaWire. Hafidha had left the FBI's hardwired network somewhere in the middle of the search. Falkner wondered if she'd even noticed.

"Hah! Got him. And he returned his rental--" The screen stopped changing; there was a rental record on it, company logo on the top. Hafidha's hands were stiff on either side of the keypad.

"What?"

"He returned it Saturday night. Es?" Hafidha looked over her shoulder and up at Falkner, eyes big, teeth in her upper lip. "Es." Her voice was small and crumbling. "It's all over colors."

*

The sound of the Relative in the bedroom made Chaz open his eyes. He sat up, struggled to his feet--he had to pause, one knee up and one down, his knuckles resting on the floor, when he rose too fast and went lightheaded with hunger. *It could be worse*, he chanted, and slowly recited his list.

It was getting kind of long.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1. It could be winter in North Dakota.
2. Waterboarding.
3. Rats.
4. Snakes.
5. Roaches.
6. I could be sitting in pee. Or vomit.
7. He could be nailing parts of me to things.
8. Home surgery.
9. Poison.
10. Concussion/head trauma/brain damage.
11. He could cut off my feet.
12. Ditto hands.
13. Blinding.
14. Flaying alive.
15. Impaling.

16. Vivisection/disembowelment.
17. Disfigurement.
18. Emasculation.
19. The house could burn down.
20. Blood eagle.
21. Boiling in oil.
22. Third-degree burns.
23. Breaking on the wheel.
24. Stretched on the rack, iron maiden, etc.
25. Death.

He suspected he'd read too much medieval history, based on the list, especially since he could have kept listing forms of torture under that etcetera--strappado, bastinado--for a good long time before he ran out. Rats and roaches, he admitted, were kind of grandfathered in at this point; he'd rather have rats than needles. But he wasn't ready to start crossing things off yet. Not while there was still a chance of making it to 26.

Chaz pushed himself to his feet, morning air cold across his thinly-clad shoulders. He folded his blanket neatly atop the pillow and stood straight facing the doorway, waiting for the Relative to bring him breakfast, because he was not going to wait on his knees. His own face in the mirror wall looked drawn and haggard, eyes sinking over cheekbones that projected like his hips.

"Good morning, William," he said, when the Relative appeared in the hallway entrance. The greeting was answered by silent, crushing disappointment. Chaz swallowed convulsively, wondering if he should try again, and instead decided to meet silence with silence.

The Relative frowned, and if Chaz had not been at the limit of his chain, he might have stepped back. But the chain rattled as he stretched it, and he was grateful for the Dutch courage. *Oh no, Charles Travis. Don't you even* think *that.*

He set his teeth, and waited.

And after ninety-three counted seconds, the Relative turned away. As Chaz reminded himself to breathe, the Relative said, "And who taught you to call your father by his Christian name, baby boy? Is that how you show respect?"

Chaz opened his mouth to correct himself--stay alive, give him what he wants, bargain and negotiate--but his voice turned into empty breath as he tried to say the words. He shuddered, swallowed again.

Say it. It was just a word. A meaningless word.

A word that had never meant anyone he cared for, or anyone who cared for him.

But the breath he took to try again was a sob, harsh enough to burn his throat like vomit. He sank his teeth into his lip. His breath came sharp and shallow through his nose, dizzying, and when he did make a sound it was a moan, involuntary, hard at the back of his throat. *One more day. Just one more. He will not make you cry.*

Mouth open, a sharp jerk, tasting blood, and he gulped air, got a full breath or something like it. "I--"

The Relative was waiting. And how ridiculous was he, that he should break at this, when he had already abased himself in every imaginable fashion? It was just a lie. Profilers lied all the time. It was a professional *skill*.

He couldn't say it.

If you can't work through, Reyes would say, *work around.*

Do what you have to do.

He thought of it, and gulped, and said, "I'm sorry. Sir. I'll try to do better."

Stern consideration. Chaz, holding his breath again, lowered his eyes to the Relative's shoes. Submission, a pose right out of Norman Rockwell goes to Hell. Or the appearance of it, just the appearance. He could watch the Relative's face sidelong, in the gold-flecked mirror tile.

And so he saw the moment when the Relative softened, and his austere expression relaxed. "I know you will, baby boy. I know you're doing your best," he said, and went into the kitchen.

Water, please, Chaz thought, but didn't dare ask for it. Instead he hunkered, buttocks resting on his heels, aching arms supported by his knees, and listened hopefully for the sound of the water running into the pail. But there was only the click of the refrigerator door, the hum of the motor. And when the Relative came back, he was carrying the syringes.

"It's not time yet," said Chaz, as the Relative laid out his tools on the table and took a seat in his habitual chair. A little hysterically, Chaz remembered fragments from a Gregory Corso poem--*my big papa chair*--and tried to keep his face calm, his voice smooth.

"It's for your own good," the Relative said. "I know it hurts, baby boy, but you have to be brave for me. You have to be strong. You need more blood if you're going to be an angel. It's the blood of the daughters of men in you; it needs to be burned clean. Women are temptresses. Whores. She lied to make them love her best, but they would have loved me if they knew. She *seduced* them. So I have to burn Addy out of you, sweetheart. And then you can be pure, like your papa."

The Relative was obsessed with Addy Villette. He was gentle and considerate with Chaz, albeit with complete disregard for Chaz's needs or desires.

Chaz knew that profile. Inside and out.

My papa, the anger-retaliation rapist. And what are the odds you were his only victim, Mom? Chaz breathed to steady himself. No book in Vegas would take those odds.

First victim, maybe. *God help me, how many more?*

He had to do the victimology. He had to understand the trigger. He had to stay alive.

I'm sorry, Mom.

His mother would understand. She'd chosen to give him birth. She'd brought the monster's spawn into the world, and she had sacrificed everything--dignity, pride, her life--to keep it safe from the monster.

She hadn't given him up. Why not? Chaz, if he'd been in a position to sit judgment, wouldn't have blamed her for a moment if she had.

"Sir--" *Sir* was easy. *Sir* was a thousand people Chaz had hated... and one or two he respected. "If I'm good... if I help, m-may I have the manacles off? I need--I really need to stretch my arms, and wash. There are sores on my wrists, sir. They're infected. I'm worried about my hands."

The Relative rolled up his sleeve and twisted the rubber tubing around his upper arm. Chaz could see the veins pop from where he waited. "The flesh is weak, angel. But it's going to be okay."

Be good, Chaz told himself. *Be good. Be good, be good, be good, be good. Stay alive. Do what he wants. You can't fight him with your body. You just have to stay alive.*

And as the needle went in, he wondered if his mother had recited the same chant to herself, while come Hell or high water, Chaz was getting himself conceived.

*

Esther poked her head around the office door, and Hafidha pretended she didn't notice the piece of white office paper twisted into a spill between her hands. "We're going to go get him," Esther said, and Hafidha closed her eyes in relief. Not that there had ever been a chance they wouldn't, but in the beginning was the word, so to speak, and whatever Esther said had a way of being translated into immediate action.

"Gotcha. I can send the Texas Stateys to his grandparent's house-- Oh. Es, this ain't good."

Esther crossed the office to lean over Hafidha's shoulder, one hand on the back of her chair. When anyone else did it, it drove her crazy. But Esther's presence felt warm against the nape of her neck.

"The whole damned county's on fire. I mean, yeah, that's why Chaz went down, to look at the place before it burned, but--Es, if he's in there, he's trapped." Her fingers traced the arcs marked on the Forest Service satellite images. Fire here, and here, and here.

"Do you know anything about wildfires?"

"It's an anomalous burn pattern." Hafidha tapped the three arcs that changed colors like opals in the sun, before she remembered that Esther wouldn't see them that way. "Somebody is doing that on purpose."

Esther straightened. She dropped the twist of paper into the wastebasket and frowned. "Tell the team to get their go bags. Yours, too."

"What about Reyes?"

"I'll tell Reyes," she said, and turned on the ball of her foot. Sensible shoes don't click on tile, but Hafidha could imagine it.

*

"What do you mean, missing?" Reyes said, frowning. At least he was frowning at her. Falkner would have liked to have known which of the folders on his desk was so damned engrossing that it took him this long to look up.

"He was due back today."

"Planes don't get delayed anymore?"

Falkner considered using Hafidha's post-industrial comment. "When was the last time Chaz was late? He planned to look at some property he inherited from his mother's family in Texas, then drive to a music festival west of Austin. Hafidha says he returned the rental car early instead, at the airport in Tyler. And that's the end of the trail."

Reyes stared up at her in a way that made her think she wasn't what he was seeing. "How do you know where he was going?"

"Spooky profiler skills. I asked."

A muscle contracted in Reyes's jaw. *And that,* Falkner thought, *is all the satisfaction I'll be getting out of that line.*

"His cell?"

"Hafidha checked. It's off. No trace. She tracked down the rental car record."

"And?"

"She read anomalous activity off it."

His right hand closed, hard. "Did you ask Dallas field office to check it out?"

"They verified the car return; the employee at check-in remembered him. After that, they know less than we do." Falkner pinched the bridge of her nose. *Damn it. I shouldn't have to tell him these things.* But she knew better. These things were what she kept track of. "If there's any chance he's still in Tyler County, we could have our work cut out for us. They've got a forest fire." She had to stop, and swallow. "An anomalous wildfire."

Reyes was too dark to turn pale, or flush, or any of the useful Euro diagnostics her own skin offered. But she knew from the set of his mouth that he was biting the inside of his lip.

"Tell the team, wheels up in thirty minutes. We'll brief in the air."

Falkner kept the relief off her face. "I already told 'em."

"The whole team?"

"Can you think of anyone we can spare?"

Reyes let out an unsteady breath. "Not this time."

*

"How did Addy die?"

"I don't know," Chaz lied.

He sat on the cushion, arms extended, pulled to the length of his chain, where the Relative had placed him before tending the rubbed wounds on his wrists with sharp-stinking alcohol and antibiotic ointment. The pain was just more pain, now, and at least the hurt was clean, eyewatering.

But then the Relative scooted him forward and sat down behind him, near enough for Chaz to feel his body heat, to smell him even over the rankness of Chaz's own sweat and the woodstove alkali of the distant--Chaz hoped it was distant--forest fire. The Relative slid close and put his arm around Chaz's chest and pulled him back, as gently as he always touched him.

For a moment, Chaz panicked, and if he had not been so awkwardly balanced he might have surged to his feet and bolted to the chain's far reach. Instead he jerked, gasped, and caught himself before he thrashed away. The sudden motion sent a spasm up his back that made him appreciate the mornings when Falkner came in moving like she'd just been in a car

accident, her breath smelling of chewed aspirin. He blinked, shook his head, and said, "It hurts."

It all hurt. The needle stings in the crook of his arm were barely noticeable; the shackle galls on his wrists were just blisters rubbed raw, after all, heated and slick as any he'd ever given himself with a new pair of climbing shoes. His hips hurt from the floor, sleeping and sitting on it, and being twisted up inside his bonds. His elbows ached with the weight of the shackles.

But his back and shoulders and neck were the *pièce de résistance*; everything else--even the migraine, now that it was fading a little--were only grace notes. "It's just the weakness of the flesh," the Relative said. "Soon enough left behind. It's hard, baby boy. It's hard. But you're strong. And where you aren't strong, your papa will carry you."

He placed his hand under Chaz's forearms and lifted them against his chest. The bar of the manacles faced out and Chaz could rest his chin on his own curved fingers. The Relative pulled Chaz gently back into his chest and shoulder, taking the strain of Chaz's weight and tension, making a backrest of his own body. He bathed Chaz in mellow relaxation, the domestic contentment of a man cradling a beloved son in his arms.

"Use me as your chair," the Relative said. And Chaz, God help him, relaxed by increments into the Relative's embrace, almost moaning in relief as the knots in his back began one by one to release. He let his head fall back on the Relative's shoulder, soaking in the warmth and support, and realized he could not remember having decided to use him for that purpose.

It was not a slip he could afford to repeat. He needed to remember where he was, who he was, and why he was doing what he was doing. Choosing this, because it lessened his pain and kept him stronger. Not because he needed the comfort. Not because he needed to be held.

Chaz bit his lip. *Focus. Think of your mother.* Oh, there was the hate. Hate was good. Hate was his friend. That white, undulating, undiluted loathing was the thing that would keep him sane and himself, in the face of the Relative's brainwashing.

He thought of the piano in the living room. Music was one thing his mother had given him that no one could take away, though Chaz hid it now. He didn't sing in company. He hadn't touched a piano with serious intent in

years. Music got you noticed, if you were any good at it. Noticed, and remarked upon.

And you only had to overhear once, some adult's headshaking pronouncement that little Charlie, picking deftly away at the piano, was nothing more than an idiot savant, a sorry mimic with no more understanding of the math or the magic behind music than a mockingbird, to stop playing where grownups could hear you. Come to think of it, that was probably the same condescending bastard who pushed for the diagnosis of Williams Syndrome he'd lugged around like a millstone for years when any idiot knew Williams Syndrome was marked by a *deficit* in spatial intelligence. Any idiot but a pediatrician, apparently.

Chaz hadn't willingly acknowledged anyone calling him *Charlie* since he was thirteen years old.

But now the music was a weapon, and Chaz reached for it. "Wayfaring Stranger," because it was there at the top of his mind.

I know dark clouds will gather 'round me
I know my way is rough and steep--

Somewhere in there he felt the vibration in the Relative's chest as he began to sing as well, and Chaz nearly fell silent. But singing together was a bond, another way to create a connection, and the Relative was following his lead.

But golden fields all spread before me
Where blessed saints their vigils keep--

Nobody sang it that way, except Chaz and his mother. And apparently the Relative.

And of all the things that had brought the reality--the inescapability--of his situation into relief, that was the strangest, and the one that ran through him like ice water, like venom, making his voice falter and fail.

The Relative continued, on to the chorus:

I'm going there to see my Savior
To sing His praise forever more
I'm just-a going over Jordan

"I'm only going over home--" singing it soft and true by Chaz's ear. Chaz closed his eyes, and realized that with the Relative holding his arms folded, taking the weight of meat and bone and manacles, for the first time since he awakened vomiting, his elbows and shoulders did not hurt. *I'm going there to see my mother,* Chaz mouthed, afraid to give it too much voice. *She said she'd meet me when I come*.

Chaz had no faith.

But his mother had. And he cursed like she had, a blasphemer against a religion he'd never believed in. It always amused him when he noticed a reflexive *Jesus!* leaving his mouth. So the song gave him comfort, though not in the way it had comforted her.

The Relative finished on an upswing that was just how Chaz's mom had done it.

I'll drop this cross of self-denial
And I'll go singing... home to God.

The Relative let the dregs of his last breath sing through his teeth and lifted his right hand to stroke Chaz's hair. Chaz suffered the touch uncomplaining. Or rather, permitted it, as the price of a few moments comforted and free from agony.

They sat together in silence, the Relative holding Chaz up, Chaz letting him bear the weight. For now, just for now.

The Relative took another breath, and Chaz felt the rise and fall of his chest, the vibration of his voice, the caress of his hand. Big hands, dry and capable, with callus on the fingertips that snagged in Chaz's hair.

If that diamond ring turns to brass,
Papa's gonna buy you a looking glass.
If that looking glass gets broke,
Papa's gonna buy you a billy goat--

One more day. Less than twenty-four hours. It was Tuesday. The team would come tonight. At the latest, tomorrow.

All he had to do was hold on.

Chaz opened his eyes to a room filled with bright, reflected light, the heat of the day rising through the stain of smoke. He had almost forgotten the smoke, the roses, the cheerful drone of toiling bees. But it was there waiting for him as soon as he lifted his head from the Relative's shoulder.

The Relative let him do it, still cradling him, holding Chaz comfortably hammocked in his arms. It might have been the light, tier upon tier of reflected light. It might have been dehydration, exhaustion, hunger. But as the gold flecks on the mirror tiles started crawling before his vision, Chaz realized that his head was swaying slightly, side to side with the Relative's singing.

Oh, God, Chaz thought. *I'm breaking.*

And the evening and the morning were the third day.

Continued tomorrow...

Day 4

Act I

Lau's dad and brothers were career Air Force. She'd grown up knowing what a Flying Fortress was. It always surprised her when she found herself thinking of the jet as one, with the initial caps lower-cased. But with the team huddled over documents, sharing information and synchronizing brains, the cabin seemed to enclose them in fragile strength. They were suspended between threat and threat, untouchable.

Now the cabin was flooded with the clear colorless light above the clouds, and they were here and huddled. And every one of them was moving and talking and thinking around the empty space where Chaz was supposed to be. They weren't untouchable anymore.

Settle down, girl. We're going to get in, find him, grab him, and get out. Nothing wounded but his pride. Yes, that sounded better. That was the public face.

She tossed Brady a bottle of water and joined him in the aisle. The seat back she leaned over was Todd's; Hafidha was beside him by the window. Across the table, Brady stood behind Reyes's rear aisle seat like a Secret Service agent behind the President. Falkner sat on the inward-facing couch, her legs stretched into the aisle. Worth pretended to be comfortable in the seat between Reyes and the window. Lau caught her eye and smiled, and jammed a section of hair behind her ear when it threatened to sweep Todd's scalp.

"Review," said Reyes. "What do we know going in?"

"We know a bunch of things that don't make sense." Hafidha drummed her fingers on the lid of her laptop. She sounded personally offended by the not-making-sense. "Chaz flew into DFW and transferred to an American Eagle flight to Tyler Pounds, for which he had a one-way ticket. He rented a car from Saturday through Monday, and apparently planned to return it at DFW and fly home from there. Instead, he returned the car to Tyler Pounds on Saturday night and vanished into thin air."

Reyes lowered his chin and fixed her with a grave dark stare. "So far the anomaly isn't *that* good."

Worth shuffled the printouts on the table. "Well, his return ticket out of DFW was never used. And no one saw him in Tyler, at check-in or the gate. There's no record of him taking another flight on either airline that flies out of there--at least, not using the Visa card Hafidha hacked into the rental car and airline reservation systems to find. And he never checked into any local hotel." She frowned and crumpled the corners of her mouth. *Trying not to look scared*, Lau thought.

"So we know he's not at the farm," Reyes said. "We know he's not at a hotel in Tyler--under his own name, anyway--and we know he didn't fly out of Tyler, again unless he used an assumed name. And he didn't drive out, unless he stole a car to do it."

"Why would he use an assumed name?" Brady objected. "Whatever Chaz meant to do, he didn't have to sneak around to do it."

Reyes looked down, just for an instant. But Lau saw a muscle go tight beside his mouth. *That was a mistake,* she thought. *Why?*

She asked, "Did the local field office get a positive I.D. from the rental agency?"

"Verbal description," Falkner said, shaking her head. "Unsolicited. But it matches Chaz. It's not like he's a... nondescript individual."

Brady frowned, and his chin came up like a listening animal's. "But you said he was going to the Kerrville Folk Festival. There's no point coming back to Tyler to do that; you're going three hours in the wrong direction. If you stick to the speed limit."

"Does Chaz stick to the speed limit?" Todd asked, wryly.

"Does Chaz believe that rules are anything other than arbitrary guidelines for people who don't know how to run a scam properly? So if I were him, I'd have driven on that night, maybe even made it to Kerrville. He's 25. Driving all night is still fun."

Todd shook his head. "There's no percentage in growing up."

"We'll have to go over some of the ground again when we get to the airport," Reyes said. Everyone knew what he meant; Dallas field office wasn't looking for the things Shadow Unit was.

"I'll talk to the guy at the rental agency," said Lau.

Reyes shot her a narrow-eyed look, and nodded. "Brady, back her up. Hafidha, widen the net on the records. Worth, Todd, establish contacts with law enforcement, emergency personnel, hospitals. Find out if anyone's seen him, and make sure if anyone does, they know who to tell."

"Dallas has arranged for a couple of vehicles when we get there," Falkner said.

"Four-wheel drive?" Brady's voice said, *They'd better be.*

"You Texas boys." Falkner smiled as if she'd forgotten she could do it. "At the suggestion of the Dallas field office, yes. Worth, copies of the photo?"

Worth nodded, pulled a thin sheaf of three-by-five glossy prints from her folder, and passed them out.

The image was cropped, Lau thought, from a larger picture. For once, Chaz wasn't mugging and didn't have his eyes closed. He stood against a background of sunlit gray rock. His smile was white in his tanned face; his eyebrows were a little lifted. He wore a faded black t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, smudged with pale dust. The silkscreening on it, battered but still legible, read, "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you?"

Another dab of dust the size of a thumbprint marked his forehead off-center. His brown hair was tumbled by whatever he'd been doing; a lock clung to one of his preposterous cheekbones like a question mark. The resolution and the lighting were good enough to show his two-colored eyes: one brown, one hazel. *Heterochromia*, he said it was called.

Lau's throat ached. A recent photo, unposed. The real Chaz, not the driver's license version. Chaz had the worst driver's license photo she'd ever seen. No, this was the Chaz who would have been driving through Tyler County, happy, expecting a weekend of fun. How could he disappear? How could someone not have seen where he went?

Someone besides the person who'd made him disappear.

"We land in ten minutes," Falkner warned, stretching where she sat.

Lau went to the front seats, dropped into the one by the window, and buckled in. Brady slid into the seat next to her a moment later. His profile,

perfect as Renaissance statuary, was sharp against the opposite window.

She opened her mouth to say something off-subject and innocuous. What came out was, "Chaz goes to music festivals?"

"He sings in the shower." He and Chaz shared a hotel room occasionally. "He's not half bad."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, there's plenty even we don't know about each other, isn't there?"

"Hmph."

He turned to her. "We'll get him." He smiled. "We have to. I haven't got my licks in for that goddamn cockroach joke."

She laughed, as she knew she was supposed to. "He'll probably hate having to be rescued, so try to be the first guy through the door."

Chaz had secrets. Well, maybe not secrets in the usual sense--things one actively hid from others. But he had a life he didn't share with the team. Intellectually, she'd known he must. But hearing it now made him seem further away, gone out of reach, like a distant relative whose life comes into focus only at the funeral.

Stop that.

What Lau saw out the window as the jet came around for its landing at Tyler Pounds Regional Airport was a single strip of asphalt laid across sere brown grass, pine woods dusty and unwashed on either side of it. She pressed her forehead against the window for a better view. "It's tiny."

"We're not staying at the airport," Brady said. "They don't have a hotel. The closest place to sleep is a Holiday Inn."

"Welcome to Texas." She grinned.

"Humph." He leaned back in the seat. "Don't knock it 'til you've tried it."

The teasing should have been part of how they prepped for the case. Today it was cursory, strained. A hasty bulwark around the gnawing fear.

She picked at a flaking cuticle. "So, an assumed name?"

Brady shrugged. "I think Reyes is just covering bases."

Lau licked her lips and settled her shoulders into the seat. The tires touched, bounced; the plane juddered. She said, "An assumed name can cover a lot of other assumptions."

Brady nodded. "Got a hunch?"

"Brady, how would you make a man disappear?"

Act II

Brady followed Lau through the plate-glass and brick corridors of the terminal. It might be small, but it was modern and more beautiful than terminals had any right to be: precisely the opposite of what you'd paint for the set of a small regional airport. "Which agency?" he asked.

"Hertz." Lau pointed. "There are only four. I wonder how many employees this place has."

"Right time of day." Brady offered. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

There was only one customer at the counter, and they waited for him to finish his business and walk out front to wait for his rental before stepping up. It wasn't that they weren't in a hurry; it was that they were playing the game of looking unworried.

It was a different script.

The guy behind the counter was Caucasian, thin, sallow, in his mid-twenties with dishwater hair curling long around his ears. Pressed shirt, carefully tied tie. Wedding ring, but he perked up when Lau walked over. Well, heterosexual men did. Brady started taking bets with himself as to how long it would be before the counterman asked if she was Michelle Yeoh.

He crossed his arms, his coat binding across his shoulders. Too hot for Texas, but it made him look like a proper FBI agent. And Hollywood Bodyguard was one of the ones he could do.

Lau spoiled his fun by flashing her I.D. immediately. "I'm Special Agent Lau. This is Special Agent Brady. Were you on duty Friday night?"

The counterman shook his head, looking faintly disappointed. "Special Agent... Lau? Not me."

His accent did interesting things to Lau's vowels, and Brady winced in recognition. It had taken a certain amount of spit polish to get that out of his own voice. Sometimes he missed it.

And right now, he put it back on and said, "If you don't mind, we'd like to talk to whoever was."

Pretty girl and a big blond authority figure with a local accent: 20 percent increase in friendly cooperation.

"Is this about that guy? It was Dave Boswick who checked the car in. Do you want to come behind the counter? Dave's on break, but I can get him."

"Thank you," Lau said, and waited for Brady to lift the hinged countertop for her. They stepped through, and the rental agent showed them into an office behind the Venetian-blind-cut window in the back wall. "It'll be just a second. Thanks."

The door shut and Lau tipped her head at the computer. "Amazing what a badge will get you, huh?"

He said, "Do you suppose the guys at Homeland Security know about this?"

"Don't you *dare* tell them."

"Pinky swear," he said, quoting Hafidha. A hazard of the job. "You're onto something, Lau. Spill it. How would *you* make a man disappear?"

She shrugged. "Magic trick. There's two basic ways. You move one man from place to place, out of sight of the audience. Or--you use two people. Twins, or close enough to twins be mistaken for each other from the front row. The penny was never under the cup at all.

"What's odd is that Chaz apparently came to East Texas, did whatever he had to do here, returned his car to this *particular* airport car rental place--and vanished into thin air. And so if I were a magic trick, how would I do that?"

"You wouldn't be Chaz, is how." He blinked. "You are the queen of misdirection."

"Cha," she said. "Princess at best. My aunt was an Exotic Inscrutable Oriental Assistant to a stage magician, until she couldn't stand the high heels any longer. She taught me a few things."

"Like where to look for the trap door?"

Lau winked, and Brady pretended he didn't notice her hands jittering. Pretend you're cool, and you're cool. A technique used by cops and soldiers since time immemorial. "Right under where the lady vanishes."

As promised, they didn't wait long. Dave Boswick was also Caucasian, but older, balding, a little soft around the middle. He looked nervously from Brady to Lau as he paused in the doorway.

"Mr. Boswick?"

He nodded and stepped inside.

"I know you spoke with Special Agent Milner," Lau said. She reached into her breast pocket and slipped the glossy three-by-five into her palm. "We just have one or two more questions."

"Whatever you need."

"Did the car come back clean? Was there anything in it? Luggage? Anything in the glove box or trunk? Under any of the seats?"

"Nothing," he said. And then he laughed. "Snack food wrappers."

When Lau glanced over at Brady, he was already looking at her. She tucked her hair behind her ear. "What kind of snack food?"

"A Snickers wrapper. Bojangles chicken, a big box. Some hippie chow wrappers and empty coke bottles. Seemed like somebody ate four or five meals in the car, really."

Brady moved closer to Lau, so she'd feel the pressure of his body heat. She leaned toward him, an acknowledgement, and handed Boswick the palmed photo. "Is this the man who returned the car?"

"Mmm." To his credit, he examined it carefully. "Was that taken about twenty years ago?"

"No."

"Then noooo. But man." He shook his head. "You know, this guy here--is he black? I can't really tell from the photo."

Brady leaned forward. "The man who returned the car was African-American?"

"Well," Boswick said, holding the photo out, "He wasn't a white guy. And he was what you would call a memorable individual. Not just the way he looked. Really nice. One of the nicest customers I've ever had. Charming, you know. Funny."

Brady and Lau shared a glance. If anything, Chaz could seem cold and a little abrasive to strangers. "And it wasn't this guy?"

Boswick made an open-door gesture with his hands. "The guy I saw was darker. Older. Might be related, though."

"Has the car been rented out again?"

Boswick shook his head. "It was a Hyundai. They're not real popular with the locals. And the state cops impounded it."

"Thank you," Brady said, and took Lau's elbow. When they were clear of the ears, he said, "Chaz was in that car."

"Snickers bar?"

"Bojangles chicken," he said. "Every time we're south of the Mason-Dixon line, he's on the biscuits and dirty rice like--well."

"White on rice?"

"Dirty brownish-yellow, in this case. Lau, if the state patrol impounded the car, they have to have pulled the rental records. Let's find out how long the car was out and what the checkout and returned mileage was. It'll give us an outside limit to where he could have parted company with the vehicle, if he was off script."

"Right," she said, and moved far enough away from him to get him to release her.

"Sorry," he said, realizing his grip was tightening.

"It's nothing." She unholstered her cell, flipped it open. "Reyes, it's Lau. It wasn't Chaz who returned the rental car. I think we need to get a sketch artist down here to work with the witness. And I think we need to operate on the possibility that he never made it to Fred. Can we get the Stateys to

start checking Bojangles chicken restaurants and convenience stores between here and there, and see if we can figure out which stretch of the Bermuda Triangle he might have vanished into? State patrol also impounded the rental car, if we can get forensics on it. No, that's all. No, it definitely wasn't Chaz. Maybe a relative, though. No, Brady and I are heading back now."

She stared at the phone after she hung it up, and frowned. "What?" Brady asked her.

"Reyes says Chaz is an orphan. No living relatives known."

Brady put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll find him."

"Yeah. But he's been missing more than 72 hours, Danny. And there's a lot of Texas to get lost in." She slid the phone away with a snap. "When we find him, what are we going to find?"

Act III

The airport had given them a room--a hastily cleared spare office, still inhabited by a photocopier, shelves of dog-eared manuals, and a coffee-stained table upon which rested a microwave. Hafidha had shoved it aside to clear a spot for her laptop; HafidhaWire was up and running.

Worth hunched over topo maps on the other end of the table. Todd was down the hall with the witness and the sketch artist. Reyes was, as far as anyone knew, out walking up and down in the world.

Falkner paced the room, telling herself that it encouraged thinking. Since there was damned little she could do at present except think, there was no comfort in it for anything except her back.

"Excuse me. Agents?" The airport security supervisor leaned into the room. "There's a state trooper here says he's responding to your request for information. About your agent."

Falkner stopped, and felt Hafidha and Worth intent behind her. "Send him in."

He was young, sunburnt, blond, uniformed, and nervous. "I'm Special Agent Falkner," she said.

Brady and Lau came in as the Statey said, "Trooper Jameson, ma'am. Agent."

"What can you tell us?"

"I had time off, or I'd've been here sooner. Long weekend and all. But I stopped a guy on Saturday afternoon, in a rental, who had FBI credentials."

Lau stepped forward and showed him the photo she'd taken to the car rental agency. "Is this the man?"

The trooper nodded. "Yes, ma'am, that was him. Stopped him on 92 a little past Spurger, southbound."

"You're sure?" Falkner asked.

The trooper turned the photo up to the light. "Dead certain. He had these freaky eyes."

"Freaky?" Brady leaned over Falkner's shoulder. "Like a sheepdog?"

The trooper blinked. "Mismatched, yeah." He touched the photo beside Chaz's hazel eye.

A good trooper spotted tiny details in a traffic stop. Falkner caught Lau's and Brady's eyes. They both shook their heads. The car rental agent hadn't mentioned that.

"There's no record in your log," Falkner said. Hafidha would have found Chaz's name in the system.

"No, ma'am." The trooper shifted his feet. "I didn't ticket him. Just a verbal warning."

"How fast was he going?" The young man blushed all the way up to his crows-feet, and Falkner took pity on him. "He's law enforcement. I know how it goes."

"Well, and he nearly got himself shot. He had his sidearm on the passenger's seat--"

Brady rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that was Chaz."

A *very* good trooper remembered details even after the adrenaline rush that came from spotting a gun during a routine stop. *Note to self: Commendation*

to Jameson in report.

"Was he alone in the car?" Falkner asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Lau took the trooper aside to squeeze more out of him. Falkner turned to Brady. "You and Lau go to the impound lot and see if the car will tell us anything."

"There's got to be some way we can speed this up--"

"Several, and we're doing them all. Go."

She hoped they were doing them. She hoped Reyes was thinking of a dozen more. Where the hell was he, anyway? Almost as soon as she thought it, the door swung open on a limited arc. Four knotty brown fingers burled around the edge, and Reyes' face poked through the crack.

He said, "If you've just returned somebody else's rental car, how do you get back home?"

"Somebody picks you up," Falkner answered promptly. "Or, okay, taxi. Greyhound. Lee Harvey Oswald wasn't too proud to take the bus. So we assume he had an accomplice?"

Reyes shook his head. "We don't assume. But as a precaution, let's pull passenger lists on any late flights on Friday. The Hertz closes at ten thirty. The last flight probably gets in not too long before that, wouldn't you say?"

"On it," Hafidha said, without otherwise acknowledging Reyes' presence. "Bingo. There's a Continental flight that gets in at 10:15. It's a turboprop, so figure depending on what equipment is available, thirty passengers tops?"

"Find them," Reyes said. Someone cleared a throat behind him, and he stood aside to let Todd into the room.

"You know," Todd said, "there's an old Irish curse about being stuck forever on the threshold, one foot in the house and one out."

"Sorry." Reyes stepped inside the door and let it shut, sealing the agents in. "You have the sketch?"

Todd held it out, and Reyes glanced. He was by habit impassive, but despite dark irises, Falkner saw his pupils dilate. A muscle in his forehead jumped.

"Hafidha, cross-reference the name 'Villette' to that inbound passenger list."

"Excuse me?" This time she did look up, one hand darting to the number two pencil tucked into her cord-thin braids. She whipped it out and they tumbled around her shoulders, releasing a scent of cocoa butter, but she didn't reach for a pad. Instead, she tucked the eraser between her teeth and bit down on the metal band.

Silently, Todd turned the sketch around. Falkner had thought she was prepared for it, just based on Reyes' reaction. But she had to blink twice to believe the evidence of her eyes, and judging by the crinkling of maps, so did Worth. "That's Chaz."

"It's Chaz in twenty years, maybe," Todd said. "The witness is adamant; we're looking for a polite, soft-spoken man in his late forties or early fifties. Who happens to bear a creepy resemblance to our missing agent."

Hafidha's laptop chimed twice, the second alert overlapping the first. "I have the mileage records on the car. Chaz, or the UNSUB, put three hundred and forty-three miles on the vehicle in a little over eight hours. Oh, and two more charges just hit his Visa card. *Damn* long weekends."

"Charges?" Reyes crossed to lean over Hafidha's shoulder. She scooted to the side before Falkner could interpose herself, and shot Falkner an eyeroll over Reyes' back.

Hafidha leaned in, reached under Reyes's chest, and pointed. "A Bojangles in Lufkin, and a non-franchise gas station in Fred."

Todd said, "Fred is a place?"

She nodded. The liquid crystal display rippled where she poked it with her finger. "Fred is where Chaz's grandparents' house is. Well, nearest place with a name. It's right next to Warren. Towns doubtless named after the sole occupants."

"So he made it that far," Todd said. "Or somebody using his credit cards did."

"The records are black and white," Hafidha said, with confidence. "It was Chaz. Or it wasn't a gamma, anyway."

Something about the look Reyes gave Hafidha made Falkner's stomach turn over. *Stephen, what aren't you telling us?*

"So he made it where he was going. We need to get to that house to see if there's a trail to pick up."

"We need to walk through fire, then," Worth said, and Falkner didn't even need to look for it to notice Todd blanching. Worth smoothed her maps significantly. "I'm not even sure we can get a chopper in there. Half the county is burning, and all the roads are closed."

"What are the odds," Todd said, "that an anomalous fire is unconnected to the disappearance of a WTF agent in the same grid?"

Reyes gave Todd The Look. "It's *his* fire."

"As much as fire belongs to anyone."

"Hafidha," Reyes said, "pull arrest records for anybody named Villette in Tyler County, would you? Take it back thirty years."

"On it, chief." Her fingers were already flying. Falkner wondered how much of that she needed, or if the typing was only a kindness to her audience. "This may take a while and some phone calls. Rural Texas, I don't know how much of the old stuff has been computerized."

"He may be related, and not named Villette," Falkner warned.

Reyes nodded. "We'll start with that."

"Todd, Worth, help her with the phone calls," Falkner said. "Reyes, a word?"

Out in the hallway, he turned to face her. She lowered her voice. "Stephen, you're worried about more than you're sharing."

"Just a gitchy feeling," he said. "Look, I've been wrong before. But when we find Chaz, we need to be prepared for anything."

"Prepared for the worst," she said, thinking, *We are. But as long as there's a chance he's alive, we can't give up on him either. There are no fates worse than death.*

"God," he said fervently. "I hope not."

*

When Falkner walked back into the room, Todd was closing his phone. "Falkner, what was Chaz's father's name? Hafidha can't find it in the system."

"Nobody knows," Falkner said. She closed her eyes. Victimology was important; it had no respect for personal dignity; and she had read Chaz's personnel file, his dossier, and the results of his background check. "It's blank on the birth certificate. His mother was a... sex trade worker."

Todd, Worth, and Hafidha shared a look that made Falkner's heart sink into her size eight-and-a-half Nine West loafers.

"There's a William Villette who was arrested twice for sexual assault," Hafidha said. "Never prosecuted. Last known address is the same as Chaz's grandparents."

"So Adeline Villette is a married name?"

"No marriage certificate on file. William's his uncle."

"Family feud?" Worth supplied. "The family disinherits the black sheep son, who lies in wait for the prodigal grandchild when he returns to claim his inheritance? And the black sheep son happens to be a gamma?"

"We're assuming he's a gamma?" Reyes, eyebrows climbing.

Hafidha made a finger go bang at her screen. "The fire is anomalous. And something was going on with the rental return."

"The anomaly might run in families," Todd said. "We don't know. Somebody around here is a gamma. Smart money says it's whatever happened to Chaz."

"East Texas Gothic, hello."

Falkner held up a hand. "Why wasn't he prosecuted?"

Another shared glance. "The victims dropped charges," Todd said. "Falkner, if this is about an inheritance--"

"I know," she said. "Don't say it."

If this is about an inheritance, William Villette has no reason on earth to keep Chaz alive.

She cleared her throat. "Worth, you and Todd get on the road. I want you to interview the victims. Hafidha, when Brady and Lau get back, the three of you start on the victimology. If he's a serial offender, there are more victims out there. Maybe they were too scared to come forward. Maybe they never managed to identify their attacker. But they're out there, and we need them."

Act IV

Chaz slept in the afternoon and dozed away most of the evening, with the unhappy result that in his fourth night of captivity he rested very little. He huddled in his blanket, listening to the growl of his stomach, popping fleas between his fingernails when he could catch them and wondering if he dared call the Relative from the bedroom to beg him for food. Finally, before dawn, he managed to sleep a little, and with the sunlight awoke determined.

Today. They'll come today. They have to.

The Relative took Chaz's blanket and gave him water and the toilet bucket, then broke his own fast with two cans of pork and beans spooned cold onto half a loaf of white bread. He washed it down with salad oil gulped straight from the bottle.

Chaz, light-headed, hands shaking with hunger, tried not to watch. If the Relative fed him, it would likely be only more granola bars and water. And Chaz would be grateful, properly thankful, though it wouldn't make up for the day with nothing or win him much ground for this one. *Four steak dinners*, he amended. *Extra sour cream on the potatoes. And a pint of Chunky Monkey, and a pint of Peanut Butter Cup*. He'd opined once to Hafidha that Ben & Jerry's was run by friendly secretive betas intent on providing tasty high-calorie foods to their brethren. The more he considered it, the likelier it seemed.

He could use a few friendly secretive betas right now. Maybe they had a strike force. The Ice Cream Strike Force, delivering much-needed food to starving genetic freaks the world over.

Chaz. You're raving.

He gulped, and tucked his knees up between his arms. It pressed the U-bends of the manacles into his sores, but the pain was distant, somewhere

on the other side of the haze of dissociation and lightheaded hunger. He needed real food, and soon, or his overclocked brain was going to devour his body to keep itself functioning. And the brain needed glucose, which it wasn't going to get from burning muscle tissue without some complicated metabolic processes.

No breakfast was forthcoming.

When the Relative came to give him his shot, Chaz was already lying on his side, knees drawn up, arms extended like a dreaming dog's forelegs, using his right biceps for a pillow. He didn't stir, didn't even open his eyes while the Relative busied himself with tubing and needle.

"Wake up, angel," the Relative whispered, holding his thumb over the pinprick so the wound would seal, after.

Chaz opened his eyes. "Please," he said, voice cracking. "I'm hungry."

"Just let go of the flesh," the Relative said. "Let yourself be purified, and the Lord will deliver you from all pain and suffering. This hurts me more than it hurts you, baby boy, but you are stubborn."

"I want to," Chaz said. He lifted his head, and the Relative helped him to sit crosslegged, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder when he swayed. "I want to be purified. I want to help you. But I can't do that if I die. Sir, *please*. I know you want to save me. I know you want me to be strong."

The Relative knelt before him. Chaz faltered to a stop when he reached out and touched Chaz's cheek, tilting Chaz's head back gently so their eyes met and locked. Chaz thought, *earnestness, openness, honesty. I am a blank slate. I am an open book. Tabula rasa. Please, please, please see me that way.*

The Relative smiled, a hopeful little smile, and tucked Chaz's filthy hair behind his ear. "Papa believes in you, baby boy. Papa knows you can be anything you want to. Papa knows you want to make him happy."

"I do," said Chaz. "I want to make you proud, sir."

Chaz felt the Relative's concern, his love and worry. "Oh, angel. I am proud. I've been pushing you too fast, sweetheart. I'm sorry. I know you're doing your best."

"Please. May I have something to eat?"

"Wait here," the Relative said, as if Chaz had any choice in the matter. "I'll bring you some food."

Chaz, his back to the smoke-stained morning brightness of the west-facing windows, closed his eyes and waited. He was learning. This was a lesson in patience, and it would be rewarded. This was his last day of durance. He would make it.

The Relative was banging around in the kitchen, and in a moment the smell of food permeated the air. The Relative was cooking for him.

Chaz's mom hadn't cooked much. Mrs. Korolenko cooked, and Chaz learned a lot from watching her. And Chaz's mom would pack him school lunches and so on, and when she wasn't working they had a regular scam they'd run. She'd scout for places that had those guess-the-number-of-objects-in-the-jar-and-win-a-free-dinner-for-two promotions. Chaz would guess--not that it was really guessing; something squishy and irregular, like Gummi Bears, could fool him a little, but if it was marbles or jelly beans or Life Savers, there was only one way they could go into the jar--and his mom would fill out the form. 'Cause you must be 18 to enter.

It still bugged him a little when he saw one. He didn't enter anymore.

It just bugged him.

The Relative was coming back. Chaz opened his eyes and looked up at him, saw him settling down with something balanced on a piece of paper towel across his wide-spread hand. The smell made Chaz's stomach twist. *Slowly*, he told himself. *Eat slowly, or it'll just come back up.* Not that there was any chance of the Relative letting Chaz decide how he was going to eat anything, but it was comforting to chant advice.

The food was canned pork and beans, heated on white bread with orange fake cheese melted between the slices. Three sandwiches, soggy and dripping as the Relative tore bits from them and tucked them into Chaz's mouth. Chaz chewed slowly, judging the Relative's patience, retarding the process as much as he could bear.

"Did Addy ever feed you, baby boy?" the Relative said, when Chaz had--bite by bite--eaten the first sandwich. "Or did she give you up so young you

don't know?"

"She didn't cook, I don't think," Chaz said. "I don't really remember." He looked hopefully at the remaining sandwiches, but the Relative seemed to have forgotten them.

He frowned at Chaz. "You don't remember much, do you?"

"She died when I was only little." Chaz winced as he heard his own words. It was a child's phrasing. "I do remember one thing she told me."

"Tell me," the Relative said, his expression sparking with interest.

It would have to be the truth. He was too tired to remember complicated lies. "She told me to remember that Jesus loved everybody, no matter how common, even lepers and prostitutes and the poor. That he loved Mary Magdalene and stood up for her just like he stood up for all the folks that had it hard."

What Chaz didn't say was that it was how he honored her memory, the only way he had ever had of doing so. He might not believe in God, but he could be like Jesus in one way. He didn't have to judge.

"Well," said the Relative, "you're in your father's house now, baby boy. And when you're like me, you'll realize that God's vengeance on those that don't repent their sins is terrible and sure. Addy might hide behind Mary Magdalene, but the fact is she was a whore, and she paid for her sins."

Chaz licked his lips, felt something flare in him, and tried to fight it down. A show of spirit would get him nothing now. He only had to stay alive. Less than a day. Any minute now.

But his mother had saved him from the monster, and he wasn't going to let the monster have her in his place. He glared up through his hair. "It's *my* house."

A flare of projected righteous wrath almost took Chaz's breath away, but the Relative looked at the sandwiches in his hand and broke a piece off the second one. It dripped glossy red sauce onto the paper towel. Chaz's mouth watered. "It should have come to me," he said. "If *they* hadn't always taken her side in everything. It's your father's house, baby boy. Don't you defy me."

I'm the one who pays for it, Chaz thought, but had sense enough to open his mouth for the piece of sandwich, and keep the words out of the way. He'd finally caught on, and couldn't believe how long it had taken him. When the Relative said *angel*, what he meant was *monster*. He was trying to force Chaz to convert, to turn him into a gamma. He just didn't have the same words for it that Chaz did.

And Chaz was terribly afraid that he was succeeding.

His stomach was shrinking. He couldn't manage all three sandwiches. But afterwards, the Relative brought the water bucket, and gave Chaz to drink, one handful at a time. Chaz thought he had forgotten the taste of water that didn't come cupped in another man's hands.

When he finished, the Relative stoked his hair back with wet hands. "Papa has to go out for a little," he said. "Don't worry, angel. Papa won't betray your faith. I'll be home before you know it."

That's what I'm afraid of, he thought.

And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

Continued tomorrow...

Day 5

Act I

Falkner stood just behind Reyes's shoulder on the front porch of the neat split-level while he rang the doorbell. She watched the window curtains, the shrubbery, the end of the garage, listened for tires, car doors. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, an interview was just an interview. But there was always that one. You thought you were interviewing a witness, and you walked in on the UNSUB, the partner, the accomplice, and got your head handed to you.

She couldn't draw her gun, but she damned well knew how far it was from her hand.

The door opened inward on a pretty, pregnant blonde, probably just past thirty. "Yeah?"

Reyes showed his I.D. and smiled at her. "FBI, ma'am. We're here to speak to Mr. Spaulding about a man he gave a ride--"

"Oh. Jimmy said you were coming." She swung the door wide and nodded them in. "Jimmy! It's the--the FBI."

Falkner suppressed a wry smile. No, nobody ever felt quite comfortable saying that.

James Spaulding trotted down the short flight of stairs from the bedroom level. He was soft and round-faced and smiling uncertainly.

Reyes smiled back, the smile that said this was all routine, even amusing, it would turn out to be nothing and *certainly* nothing that would ever trouble the Spauldings again. Spaulding visibly relaxed. "Special Agent Reyes, and this is Special Agent Falkner."

Falkner showed her I.D. and shook Spaulding's hand. Also soft, a little damp, smaller than hers.

"Come on into the den," Spaulding said.

"Would y'all like some sweet tea?" Ms. Spaulding asked, half-turned toward the kitchen.

"Thank you, ma'am, yes."

People who accept hospitality are guests. Guests are safe to talk to. Not for the first time, Falkner wondered if Reyes even had to think about this part anymore.

Spaulding's den had a brown plush La-Z-Boy which he perched on the front of, an armchair where Falkner sat and didn't lean back, and a leather couch. It backed up to the wall, so she left it for Reyes.

"Mr. Spaulding," Falkner said, "on Saturday night you flew into Tyler Pounds at 10:15 p.m." They knew that; Hafidha had gotten the basics from him over the phone. But it sped things up if she started him in the right place. She pitched her voice for warm, interested. I-really-appreciate-this. "How did you meet the man you gave a ride to?"

"He came up to me in the parking lot. I was getting my car."

"Had you seen him before?"

"Oh, no."

"Did he tell you his name?"

Spaulding thought. "I could have sworn... But you know, I guess not."

Ms. Spaulding came in with iced tea. "Anything else you need?"

Falkner did the smile this time. "No, thank you, ma'am. It's very kind of you." It was called sweet tea in the south with reason, but this batch wasn't oppressively so. She waited until Ms. Spaulding left the room to ask, "What did he say when he came up to you?"

"Well, he asked me for a ride."

"And you agreed," Reyes said.

Spaulding frowned, blinked, shook his head. "I guess that wasn't too smart. But you could tell he was all right. There's just some people you know right away."

Falkner thought of Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy and reminded herself that lecturing the witness wasn't on the agenda. "Where did he want you to take him?"

"It wasn't very far. Just a lift. You know."

"Where, Mr. Spaulding?" Reyes pressed.

"Oh, just... I guess it *was* pretty far. Didn't seem like it, really-- Huh. It was all the way down past Fred, and then out the county road. Ginny was mad as hell when I got home."

Reyes pulled a county map out of his inside pocket and laid it on the coffee table. "Can you show us where?"

Spaulding traced roads on the map. His finger slid slower the further it went, as if he was waiting for reality to catch up with his memory of the events. He scratched his hands through his hair. "Hell, it was hours. I guess..." He looked up, hopeful, as if Reyes and Falkner could explain him to himself. "He was mighty good company. But it was awfully far."

Spaulding seemed disoriented. No, as if he *had* been confused, as if he were coming out from under anaesthetic.

"Did you have a drink?" Reyes asked abruptly. "Smoke a joint? Eat anything with him?"

"Of course not!"

"Mr. Spaulding, we're not the Highway Patrol," Falkner said, soothing. "We're not going to report you for DUI. But we do need to know everything that happened while you were with this man."

"Nothing like that." But Spaulding was nervous. Falkner had a good idea why; he was wondering if there *had* been something, and if it was possible he wouldn't remember. Rohypnol worked on men, too.

"And the place you dropped him off--was there a building?"

"Sure. Farm right out at the end of the dirt road." Spaulding shook his head. "How the hell did he get to the airport? I didn't even think..." Falkner could see the fear growing in him.

"That was the only place you went?"

"Yeah--oh! No, first we stopped at the Albertson's outside town. He needed groceries."

She and Reyes exchanged another look. "Groceries."

"Stocking up, by the looks. Said he had his kid staying with him. Damn, I'm glad I'm not having to eat crap like that. Pardon," Spaulding said, an aside to Falkner.

"Like what?" asked Reyes.

"Store-brand junk. Three, four loaves of white bread. Couple jars of peanut butter. Cans of pork 'n' beans. Margarine. Condensed milk. Packages of hot dogs, the cheap ones. I told him he could go ahead and get better, but he said what he had was fine."

Falkner leaned forward, ignored the twinge that went across her back. "I'm sorry. You told him--"

"I had plenty of cash on me, he didn't have to get the cheapest."

"*You paid for the groceries*?" Reyes asked.

Spaulding's mouth opened. Nothing came out. His eyes widened; he seemed to collapse into himself in a way a man his age ought not to be able to do. "I did," he whispered. "Jesus, I did."

Falkner unfolded the sketch of the man the Hertz employee had described. "Is this the man you gave a ride to?"

Spaulding looked, nodded. "Jesus. What's he done? What did he do to me?"

"It's all right, Mr. Spaulding. You'll be fine now." Except for not trusting strangers for a while. Maybe not such a bad thing.

He was already calmer by the time he showed them to the door. Falkner had her phone out as soon as they left the house. "He makes people trust him."

Reyes's mouth was a hard line. "Or Spaulding is a damned easy mark. Or was drugged, somehow, but it doesn't sound like it."

"It could explain why Villette wasn't prosecuted for the rapes." Falkner swallowed, and speed-dialed Hafidha, and knew she hadn't hidden the reaction from Reyes.

"Gimme some work, Es," said Hafidha's voice in Falkner's ear.

"The house Chaz inherited. It's at the end of County Road 4643?"

"Yep."

"That's where Spaulding dropped Villette off."

A moment of silence. "I'll get a liaison with the firefighters."

Falkner snapped the phone closed.

Reyes opened the door of the field office's black GMC Yukon. "He told Spaulding he had his kid staying with him."

"Might have been justifying the quantity of groceries."

"He didn't need to. You heard Spaulding; he wasn't questioning anything."

"You think we're looking at a father-son team? Father-daughter?"

"Call Hafidha back. Tell her to find out if William Villette has children." His hands clenched on the steering wheel.

*

The intersection with Highway 225 was marked with the name of the town to the north: Looneyville. Chaz would have broken out in Coyote and Roadrunner jokes. Worth was glad they were going east to Nacogdotches instead.

"I hate this," she said.

Todd glanced away from the road. Light bounced off the rearview mirror and across his glasses. "You've interviewed rape victims before."

"No, it's not that. I mean, I hate that, too. No, it's Chaz. If he'd wanted us to know about his mother, he'd have told us."

"Maybe he thought it wasn't important."

"It wasn't. Now it is. But he doesn't have any say in it. It feels like... picking locks."

Todd raised one shoulder. Given his size, it wasn't the grand gesture it would be with Brady, but it was pretty articulate, even so. "Victimology always does."

"Yeah, but I don't have to see the victims at work every day afterwards."

And she might not get to see this one, either.

"Shit," she declared.

After a moment, Todd said, "Yeah."

Sometimes it was annoying as hell to work with profilers. Sometimes it saved a lot of words.

Worth had started it, so it was her responsibility to get them out of it. "And why are *you* driving?"

"I've been doing it for an hour and a half. You just noticed? I got to the driver's side door first, that's why."

Worth shook her head. "What's that quote about age and guile?"

Todd grinned at the view out the windshield. "Works every time."

The address they wanted was a fifteen-year-old brick-faced single-story with a lawn and begonias and a security service sign beside the front step. Worth rang the bell. She could feel Todd being unthreatening behind her, a small, bespectacled, middle-aged man. The crime was several years old, but PTSD couldn't read calendars.

A shadow passed behind the peephole (so few suburban homes had them), and a moment later, the deadbolt shifted. The door opened on a security chain.

Good for you, Worth thought. *Don't let them convince you you're paranoid*.

She couldn't tell much about the woman on the other side of the door. "Shelly Keyser? Agent Daphne Worth, FBI. This is Agent Todd. Agent Gates said you'd speak with us about what happened to you."

"I told the police everything." Her voice was pitched low, and hoarse. "When it happened."

She'd had two hours to think about what she'd agreed to. "Yes, ma'am. But we still need your help. Please. May we come in?"

A sharp intake of breath, an exhale. "Let me see your I.D."

Worth handed over her folder, and passed Todd's in too. A moment passed. The door closed and the chain rattled loose.

Shelly Keyser was taller than Worth and nervous-thin. Her long brown hair hung in a French braid to her shoulder blades, and her brown eyes were wide-open, her gaze hitting Worth's face, Todd's, bouncing off like a

Superball. She looked younger than her age, which from the police report was 28.

Her living room was clean and carefully decorated, without surprises. She waved Worth and Todd to the couch and perched on the edge of a painted wicker chair like a hummingbird settling on a twig. "Of course I'll help," she said. Worth was reminded of Chaz in Hafidha's office, saying he couldn't do Tyler County. Everything Keyser said seemed to have twice as many syllables as Worth was used to. "But I try not to think about it. To be in the past. I got counseling after, afterward, and you know, it helped a lot. That's one of the things I learned." Keyser rubbed her palms down the thighs of her jeans.

Todd leaned forward. "Ms. Keyser--"

"Mrs." Keyser smiled. "Dave and I got married right out of college."

He nodded. "Mrs. Keyser. We're investigating the disappearance of one of our agents. We think the man who was charged with attacking you may be involved."

The hummingbird left the branch. Worth was half-prepared for it, but only half. Keyser paced to the other end of the room and stood at the picture window, staring through the partly-open blinds and the sheer curtains between them.

"Why do you think so?"

Curious question, Worth thought.

"We'd like to make sure," Todd said. He was doing his shapeshifter trick, letting his shoulders slope and his eyebrows lift, blinking his indeterminately blue eyes behind his glasses. He looked more like a fingerprint tech than a field agent. *Your secret is safe with me*. Awfully good trick for a guy who used to make his living publishing secrets. He opened the folder he'd brought in under his arm. "I have a sketch of the man we suspect. Would you look at it? See if it's the man who attacked you?"

Keyser paused long enough that Worth thought she'd refuse. Then she nodded sharply and walked back to stand in front of the couch. Todd held out the sketch. Her eyes clenched shut, and she turned away. "Yes."

Todd caught Worth's eye. *The handoff*. Worth nodded. "Mrs. Keyser. Why did you drop the charges against him?"

All the nervous motion that had characterized Shelly Keyser disappeared. At last she said, "I wasn't sure..."

"You identified him without hesitation, even this long after the attack. Did he threaten you? Were you afraid he'd retaliate?"

Keyser looked over her shoulder, white-faced, her eyes flitting from Worth to Todd.

Todd curled his hands over his knees, braced. "Mrs. Keyser, might I use your bathroom?"

She met his eyes and looked down. *My God,* Worth thought. *She knows what he's doing. And she's ashamed he has to do it for her sake.* Somewhere under all the flutter was an entirely different woman. "It's down the hall." Keyser pointed with her head, not looking up. "Second door on the right."

"Thank you." Todd levered himself up and went down the hall, careful not to look at Worth. He trusted her to get the statement, to catch everything. She hoped he was right.

"Mrs. Keyser," Worth began.

"I work in my church," Keyser said abruptly. "I volunteer at the food bank. I love my husband and my parents. I forgive people. I pray every day. I am a good person."

"I... believe you are."

Keyser shook her head and looked down at her hands. "After--the police asked me, 'Did you fight back?' I saw the nurse look at my hands, and the way her face-- I couldn't testify. I knew they'd ask that. And I'd have to tell the truth."

"Mrs. Keyser, a lot of rape victims don't fight back. They're too frightened, or they think they'll be hurt worse if they do. It doesn't mean they weren't raped."

Keyser flung her head back and took a hard, sharp breath, like a drowning person whose face breaks water for what might be the last time. "He told

me I deserved it. He told me it was God's punishment, because I was disobedient to His will."

"To your attacker's--"

"No. To *God's* will. And it was as if... what was happening didn't matter to him, as if he was just following orders. He was so calm, the whole time." Her words stumbled over the air in and out of her lungs. "And I knew he was right. I deserved it." She started to cough--no, it was crying, and she was fighting it.

"No one deserves that."

"They said that in the hospital. The police officer said it. My therapist-- But you don't understand. I *knew*. All I could think about was how I'd been wrong. I could feel how angry God was, how He would never forgive me. It was my own fault."

Rape victims sometimes blamed themselves. Trauma survivors sometimes lost their faith.

This was something else.

"When-- Mrs. Keyser, I'm sorry to do this, but I need you to remember. When did you feel that way?"

Keyser shook her head.

"Was it before he raped you, or after?"

Keyser wiped her eyes, rough and angry. "I was... I was unlocking the car. I'm always careful, in parking lots. I saw him. *I saw him*, and I wasn't scared, I let him walk right up to me, and that was when I knew I was wrong, and sinful, and this was my punishment."

Keyser subsided onto the chair, her eyes closed.

I can't fix this. I can't tell her he made her think those things. Why would she believe it?

But the things that had filled Shelly Keyser's head, that she couldn't get away from, belonged to her attacker. Worth was sure of it.

*

Cathy Aronofsky, in Lufkin, told them the same story. She told it angrily, with a different coda: she no longer believed in God, or went to church. But the conviction she was being punished for the sins of pride and disobedience had kept her helpless during her rape, and kept her from pressing charges.

Her rapist was stern, aloof. He'd called himself God's messenger. And he was definitely William Villette.

Back at the Yukon, Todd leaned on the fender. "Want to drive?"

"I want a shower. Maybe three. No, you drive while I call in."

"Do I need to mention that Cathy Aronofsky and Shelly Keyser are both tall, slender, dark-eyed, and dark-haired?"

"Coincidence?"

Todd raised both eyebrows. "Do we believe in that now?"

"Ugh." She slumped in the passenger seat. "He made them complicit in their own damned *rapes*, Sol."

"No, he didn't." His voice was uncommonly sharp. When she looked, so was his face. "He made them *think* they were. It's just another kind of force and coercion. They had no choice."

It bothers him even more than it does me. "He took away the victim's last refuge." Because after the crime, it was possible to say, "I didn't make it happen," and start rebuilding life from there.

If Chaz was still alive--

"...Then what's happening to him?" muttered Todd.

Worth glared at him. "I preferred not to say it out loud."

"Use your indoor-thinking voice, then." He smiled thinly and started the car. He seemed to be focused on merging into traffic. But he broke the silence with, "Dibs on telling Chaz about the Phoenix landing."

"What?"

"On Mars. He'll want to know."

Because he'll be alive. And well. He'll want to know. Her breath tried to stutter in her tight throat. But she swallowed, blinked the sting out of her eyes. "You'll have to arm-wrestle Hafidha for it."

Back in the old days, profilers worked solo. It would be horrible to be alone with this. Worth thumbed her phone keypad.

"Geez, I thought we'd lost you, too," Hafidha said. She sounded as if she meant it. "Where are you?"

"Lufkin."

"Good. Don't come back."

"What?"

"We'll meet you at the county sheriff's in Woodville. We're shifting ICP to follow the evidence. What've you got so far?"

"Both rape victims were under the influence of some kind of emotional projection." Worth's voice sounded flat and tired in her own ears.

"Yeah, so was the guy who gave our freak a ride from the airport. Want the bad news?"

"You mean that wasn't it?"

"Uh-uh. Bad number one: We think your two victims are the tip of the proverbial iceberg."

It made a certain stomach-churning sense. "There's a two?"

"The fire just jumped the fireline." A little pause, and Hafidha went on, her voice tight. "And the firefighters found a body in the burn area."

Act II

Lau and Hafidha, correlating records from the surrounding hospitals and police jurisdictions, had found twelve cases: women who'd come to the emergency room evidently raped, but refusing to call it that, refusing to identify an attacker or press charges. None of them had defensive wounds. The dates of their emergency room admissions were randomly spaced over the past year.

"Get the sketch to local law enforcement," Falkner ordered Lau. "Ask them to find the victims and see if they recognize him."

"On it." Lau nodded once, briskly, and darted off down the hall to make Tyler County's finest jump through hoops. And like it, too.

The best in the world, this team. The best had to be enough. Falkner swallowed two ibuprofen and half her bottled water.

"Head, or back?" Reyes asked from behind her.

"Both. I wonder if I'd feel better if I didn't have daughters."

He was perched on the edge of a counter in the county sheriff's briefing room, reading the rape victims' records, shuffling from one to the other. "Want me to answer that?"

"No."

He dropped the pile of paper on his knee, abrupt and graceless. "Chaz is a lot better at this."

It made her insides clench. "I didn't want you to say that, either."

"Why should I suffer alone?" He tapped the records. "Todd's right. He hunts a very specific physical type. Geographically, he seems to operate within about two hundred miles of here in any direction. If we can reinterview these new victims, we might get a better sense of his script. But I'm going to guess, based on the victimology so far, that he hunts more often than he attacks. When something triggers him, he seeks out someone who fits his parameters. He doesn't settle. That has to take a while."

"He's patient. Focused. In control."

"All the victims are from within the past year. When did Chaz's grandmother die?"

"A little over a year ago. It took the lawyers a while to track him down."

A muscle jumped in Reyes's cheek. "He didn't live here. He came back after they died. I wonder where he was before that?"

Reyes was talking about William Villette. The predator, the hunter, was under his skin again. Everything was about prey. Anything else was just tracks to follow, even Chaz. Falkner shivered.

Chaz had given up this trip. They'd caught a case, worked it hard all Friday, were prepared to do the same on Saturday. But Falkner knew how much Chaz had wanted this long weekend.

So when he came in on Saturday morning, she'd said, "You. Go to Texas." He'd missed his Friday flight; Falkner told Hafidha to find him another.

Chaz would be safe in D.C. if Falkner hadn't made him go.

Brady appeared in the doorway, his chest rising, falling. "The coroner says the body the firefighters found was five foot eleven."

Falkner's legs threatened to give way; she groped for a chair. It was Reyes who slid one behind her knees, and she dropped onto it. You didn't say "thank God." It was still a grief to someone. *But not to us, thank God. Not to us.*

Brady puffed out air, and said, "He also says the corpse had a disposable lighter in his right hand."

Falkner tensed. Reyes did, too, like a cat at a movement in the grass. She said it aloud, for Brady's benefit. "He projects to control his victims."

"And they'll die to protect him, if he puts it into their heads." Reyes's voice was harsh. "I said it was his fire."

"If I've got Chaz, I've got his wallet and I.D.," Brady said. "I know who's going to come for him. Either I move him someplace harder to find--or I block access."

So manipulating the fire could be a hopeful sign. Falkner turned to Brady. "We need to talk to the firefighters."

He nodded, remarkably like Lau. "I've got the name and number of the captain in charge. He'll meet me at their base camp."

"Go with Brady," Reyes told her. "Before you start dismantling the furniture."

Yes, he was damned good at his job.

She stood up and grabbed her coat from the hook by the door. Brady barely had time to get out of her way.

Outside it was deep twilight. She stopped with her hand on the driver's side door latch of the SUV.

"What?" Brady asked.

Until he asked, she didn't know herself. Then she registered the faint winter-night smell of woodsmoke, and the air that made the trees mutter like an angry crowd.

"The wind's rising," she said, and watched comprehension dawn.

*

The Relative hadn't returned by nightfall. Nor had he left Chaz a blanket, and as the darkness rolled down the sky behind the roses, Chaz began to shiver. He drew his knees up, thinking about his list.

It was the best day of his captivity yet. He was hungry again, but he'd had at least one square meal, and he felt stronger for it. He had the energy to shoo the buzzing flies from the sores on his wrists. Maggots; he should put that on the list, but he was too tired to think about it very hard. Instead, he leaned forward and chafed the insect bites on his ankles with the pads of his fingers as best he could, brushing away hard coagulated crystals of lymph. He didn't dare scratch; his nails were filthy, and the last thing he needed to do was break the skin and give himself another set of infections.

Chaz glanced out the window again, wondering if he heard the crunch of tires in the driveway, and performed a textbook double-take. Something about the sky was wrong. The horizon had been glowing orange with the sunset, but the sunset should have faded by now.

It's the fire. Chaz was on his feet before he'd finished forming the thought, leaning on the end of his chain, trying to stretch toward the window for a better view. He couldn't tell how far away it was, and wondered if the woman at the convenience store had gotten her wish, and a parking lot full of sexy smoke-jumpers.

As he stood watching, the smell of char overwhelmed everything else--the smell of roses, sweet as rot, the reek of bacteria breeding on his own unwashed skin. Supposedly, you got so you couldn't smell yourself anymore, but it hadn't happened yet. Chaz wasn't sure he believed it.

With the burned scent came something else; a trickle of air through the broken windowpane, chilling his face. The wind was shifting, coming around to the west. Pushing the fire this way. "Come on, Reyes," he muttered. "Any time would be a good time now."

Like a kid on Christmas eve, he should sleep. If he slept, when he woke, like magic, the team would be here to collect him.

Magic, indeed. As if his words and thoughts had been an incantation, he heard something on the rising wind. A deep, mechanical stutter; the distant thunder of helicopter blades.

Chaz pushed closer to the window, stretching his arms, pulling against the chain. There might be gliding lights against the dark, green and red. Coming closer. He yearned towards the swelling sound, only mildly surprised to find himself praying. *Oh, please. Please. Please. I held on. Please let them be coming.*

He prayed out loud, almost, if he could put any voice behind it, his lips moving, his chest heaving. Pleading with God, with the universe, with anybody who could hear him. That sound, out of the real world, the world outside this horrible house, the cold floor, the sweat and itch and thirst and hunger. Deafening now. Low. It was low. It was his, there, salvation.

The team was coming. Perfect timing; perfect. An easy rescue. The Relative wasn't even here. This was the angel *Chaz* had been waiting for, here for him, an Annunciation from the sane, clean, decent real world outside this hell--

He saw the lights, the sound dopplering on, the helicopter moving past, enroute to the fire, and he knew.

They weren't coming for him.

Close by, someone started screaming.

Act III

When they arrived at the fire base camp, Falkner was surprised by the quiet. The space around the little gas station (the same one that had charged Chaz's credit card) was crammed with vehicles in Forest Service faded green, work lights, tarps stretched for daytime shade, equipment she

couldn't make sense of in the harsh, contrasting light. Men and a few women in an assortment of uniforms moved from light to light, quick, efficient. They knew what they were doing, just as the team did. No need for shouting.

A man came toward them, bringing with him an overpowering stench of smoke. He carried his helmet and gloves. As he got close, Falkner decided he was a little younger than she was; late thirties, maybe. His white-blond hair was cropped short and irregularly flattened by sweat and his helmet, and his face was ruddy even in the work lights, smudged with soot.

"You must be the Feds," he said as he came up, and stuck out his right hand. The knuckles and thumb were glossy with a line of scar tissue. "Mike Pelletier. Battalion Chief."

"Special Agent Esther Falkner. You've spoken to Special Agent Brady on the phone."

Brady and Pelletier shook hands.

"So you've got a man in there, Agent Brady tells me."

We hope so, Falkner thought. *Because it beats the alternative.* "We think there's a suspect in the area as well, using the fire as cover."

"He may be making your job harder, in fact," Brady added.

"I heard from the coroner. But if that crispy critter was him, he's not making trouble for anybody now."

Falkner blinked.

"Sorry," Pelletier said. "Hazard of the job, the sense of humor."

"We get that, too," Falkner assured him. "No, we think the body you found was a victim."

"With a lighter in his hand?"

Every time, it was a different story, but the refrain was fundamentally the same. "The man we're after is charismatic, charming, able to convince people to do what he wants. Even strong-willed people. He may have manipulated the victim into starting a new fire. He's probably done it several times already."

Pelletier's mouth pressed tight closed. "God damn. That explains a thing or two. I just sent one of my crew to the hospital because a burn started across the fireline from an area under control."

Brady dropped his chin. Falkner recognized the movement; he was angry. There was no sign of it in his voice when he said, "We think he's blocking access to a residence in the woods. Probably where he's hiding, and where he's holding our agent. I can show you on a map."

Pelletier's map was a big detailed topo on the wall in an office trailer. It was studded with pin markers in a system Falkner couldn't read. Brady picked out the county road, identified the property that county records said now belonged to Charles Travis Villette.

Pelletier shook his head. "Abandoned. We evacuated everybody on that road three days ago. No record of anyone in residence out there."

"Did you follow up?" Brady asked. "Knock?"

Pelletier's eyes narrowed, but to his credit he admitted, "We took the word of the post office and the county auditor. Once we need to evacuate, we're kinda pressed for time."

Three days, Falkner thought. If someone had come to the house, if they'd knocked, if Chaz was there and alive and heard them-- But no one had. "If our suspect is using the fire to block access-- Are the breakouts consistent with that?"

Pelletier eyed the map and its markers. His shoulders rose and fell. "Yeah," he said softly.

"We need to get to that house."

"As soon as we can get a corridor through. But you're not going tonight."

Brady began, "There's got to be--"

"No, there don't. October of '06, four firefighters killed in San Bernardino National Forest in California when the fire caught up with their vehicle. Fifth one died later, with third-degree burns over ninety percent of his body. Good men, knew their work. When I say you're not going, you better damned well believe I know what I'm talking about."

Brady's jaw was set. Falkner touched his elbow and said to Pelletier, "We know you do. You understand how it is."

Pelletier blew air out through his lips. "I do. We'll get you there soon as we can." He looked back at the map. "I'd sure as shit like to know how anybody but my people could be out there. Your perp'd have to walk right past my hand crews to do what you say he's doing. And nobody's stronger-willed than a hotshot."

The back of Falkner's neck prickled. She caught Brady's eye. Yes, he'd realized it, too. "Chief Pelletier, if we wouldn't be in the way, we'd like to set up our team on site here, to speed up our response time."

"I was going to say. You can use the trailer."

It was no smaller than the briefing room. And they were one person short. "Thank you."

She waited until they were outside, out of earshot of Pelletier. Then she looked at Brady and saw the mirror of her own grim expression. "Not just civilians. He's using his projections on the *fire crew*."

*

Brady watched Falkner stalk off to the Yukon, saw her open her phone. Then he planted his boots in the gravel, relaxed, and breathed deep and slow. He envisioned afternoon light, an empty parking lot, a whiff of smoke. Turning off the highway from the north, pulling up to the pumps. Exit car, shoes crunching on the gravel. Look down left--yep, there are the bathroom doors, marked on the side of the building. Then, stomach growling, cross to the door of the little building.

If it was Chaz. The trooper had stopped him only minutes before, so yeah, it was. When Chaz left here, was he alone?

Brady shook off the picture of the place as it would have looked Saturday afternoon, and went into the real thing, in real time.

The fluorescents were harsh on cellophane and plastic and the bright ink of ads for beer, chips, soda. He went up to the counter and smiled, and the tall, heavy woman behind it rose from her folding chair. He let the Dallas come back into his words. "Ma'am. I'm Special Agent Daniel Brady with the FBI. Were you working on Friday evening, around six p.m.?"

She looked him up and down and beamed. *The big blond cowboy melts another heart*, he thought, amused in spite of everything. "Yep, sugar, I was. Something I can do for you?"

"I wonder if I could ask you about a customer you had then. Tall, thin man, brown hair, dark-complected, driving a silver Hyundai. He'd have bought gas and--" Brady felt the store stock looming behind him, "--snack food, and paid with a Visa." He pulled his copy of Worth's photo out of his pocket and offered it to her.

"I remember him. Nice boy, polite, kinda shy. A Yankee. I teased him about his granola bars. He took the whole box." She looked up from the photo. "Dear Lord, he wasn't dangerous, was he?"

"No, ma'am. He's a federal agent. When he left here, was there anyone with him?"

"Nope. Saw him get in the car and drive off south. Asked how to get to County Road 4643, if that helps."

"Have you seen this man before?" Brady slid the sketch of William Villette across the counter.

She frowned at it, at Chaz's photo. "Hell of a resemblance. But this one's older. No, haven't seen him."

"You're sure?"

She looked again, and nodded.

"If you do, don't draw his attention. Call the county sheriff as soon as you can." How did you warn people that a dangerous man had the ability to make you like and trust him?

But hell, a lot of dangerous men did. They didn't even have to be gammas.

Brady stepped outside, walked to the gas pumps. A Forest Service crew transport arrived as he did; weary, soot-black firefighters staggered off it, collected backpacks and Pulaskis from the cargo compartments, and headed toward the lights of what looked like a makeshift dining hall at the end of the parking lot.

Chaz might have stopped again, on his way to the farm. Something might have stopped him. But there was a good chance he'd got to his destination.

The woman he'd just talked to was probably the last person to see him, other than the-- *Don't think "killer."*

All right, think it. Because they were all talking, acting, as if Chaz was lost, held hostage, captive. But William Villette targeted women. He wasn't a sadist; he didn't take pleasure in the terror and pain of his victims. They'd all said he seemed distant, removed from their suffering. Above earthly torment. Nothing in his psychopathy or his manifestation pointed toward holding an adult male prisoner.

On the other side of the argument, there was the corpse the fire left behind. Suggesting that he didn't stick at murder.

If William Villette was keeping them from reaching that house, why assume it was to keep them from reaching Chaz? Why would Villette keep him alive?

Don't give up on him. But Brady felt his hope eroding.

*

Chaz flailed. Screamed, screamed harder. Not the chaos-carrying shout he learned at the Academy. Shrieking like a child, burning his throat, hurling himself against the chain again and again and again and again, the snap of links no cushion, metal cutting flesh with blunt edges, thick slick-sticky well of blood sliming his hands, spattering from his fingertips. Screaming, *screaming*, every lunge with his whole weight snapping his head on his neck, stretching tendons in his elbows and shoulders, more pain, more *fucking* pain, didn't matter, he was going to die here and he'd trusted them and *no one was coming for him.* No one. No one. No one.

Bastards. Bastards. Oh god. *Bastards*. He slammed himself against the chain again, felt it jar taut against the unyielding staple, couldn't stop. More blood, something tore, even the blood wasn't enough to oil the manacles over his hands. One more time, one more. Scream. Scratch. Live, dammit. *Live.*

A fresh green sound like a finger popped inside a cheek; a flat sharp crack right after. Fresh pain drove Chaz to his knees, hands flat on the tile before him. Electric hurt shot up the right arm; fire dripped down it. He screamed, doubled over, tasting sweet snot and salt and blood copper, and slammed the manacles against the floor, swinging over and over as if a hammer were

in his hands. Tile chipped, flew. Sliced his cheek. Again. Again. Harder. *Pull*.

He reared back, weight against the chain, and the--

--black tunnel vortexed tight down on him, a swirling deeper than the darkness of the dining room: the carousel spin of reaction to sudden, nauseating pain. He fell onto his right side, mercifully, and the impact jarred his dislocated shoulder back into the socket with a wet satisfying pop. Chaz sobbed, his cheek pressed to the tile floor, the throbbing heat of injury rolling up his right arm from wrist to shoulder, spreading along his neck and down his spine.

He would have curled in on himself like a kicked animal, but he was at the length of his chain. He flexed his biceps, dragged himself across the floor until he could draw his arms up to his chest and press his face to the backs of his fists. "Oh god. Oh god. Oh god." The right wrist fired searing sparks up his nerves with every motion; sprained, at least, if he hadn't given himself a scaphoid fracture. The shackles chafed lacerated flesh. Every breath guttered in, then out as if it were his last.

The worst of it was, he should have known it was useless. He had done this to himself before, screaming and kicking and pounding on the door of a little dark place until his hands were too sore and swollen to keep it up, until someone's voice on the other side of the door, a voice he hardly knew, said, "You're not coming out until you can be a good boy."

No one was coming to save him. No one was coming in time.

"Oh, please," he said, gagging on it, every word a bubble of hurt. "Just let me die."

Act IV

Janeanne Coburn was tiny, light-boned, straight-backed, her hair showing gray at the scalp where the strawberry blonde dye job was growing out. Lau's phone call had gotten her out of bed, but she was dressed by the time Brady and Reyes got to her door. Well-dressed, too: creased slacks and a sweater set, and neat pearl earrings.

She was the living spit of the high school teachers who'd scared Brady worst. If this one raised her eyebrows, his blood was going to freeze in his veins.

She'd offered them iced tea, because that's what you did, but none of them wanted it, really.

"The young lady told me you wanted to know about Adeline Villette," Coburn said. Brady recognized a scaled-down version of Falkner's voice of command. Teaching a generation of sixteen-year-olds probably had a good bit in common with kicking enlisted ass in a war zone. "I don't suppose you know where she is now?"

The answer, Brady thought fleetingly, depended on what you thought of prostitution. Reyes responded, "She was in one of your classes, her senior year."

"History, her senior year, and English her junior year. It was a small school district." Coburn's smile was dry. "I was also faculty advisor for the Drama Club. She was a member for two years."

"Did you know her well?"

Coburn laid her small, thin-skinned hands over her knees and tilted her head. It occurred to Brady that they were interviewing her because she permitted it. If she'd wanted, it might have been the other way around. "Agent--Reyes? No one knows teenagers well. They don't know themselves. But what I knew of Addy Villette, I liked very much. She was a good student, and a nice young woman."

"Was she planning on college?"

"She was offered partial scholarships to Smith and Sarah Lawrence."

"But she didn't go."

"Not with a partial scholarship, no. Farm families in Tyler County are hard pressed for tuition money."

"Why didn't she pick a state school?"

Reyes made it sound like just another question in the list. Brady knew better.

For the first time, Coburn looked away from Reyes; she pinched an imaginary bit of lint off the fabric over one knee. "I expect she wanted to see a little more of the world."

Reyes leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, his hands clasped in front of him. "I expect she wanted to get further away from home."

Coburn's head came up again. "You sound as if you mean more than you're saying."

"Ms. Coburn," Brady said, "What was Adeline Villette's home life like?"

"Her parents thought the world of her."

"Did she get along with her brother?"

Coburn looked straight through Brady's eye sockets into his brain. "I believe it's time for me to ask why the FBI would want to know."

Pity that seventy-odd was too old to join the Bureau.

Reyes looked down at his joined hands and smiled. "You're right, Ms. Coburn. I apologize for keeping it from you this long. William Villette is a suspect in a case we're working."

"Then why are you asking about his sister?"

Reyes was silent for long enough that Brady wondered if he'd fumbled a handoff. "We study a subject's victims as well as the subject himself."

If Brady hadn't been watching, he'd have missed it: the stiffening of her shoulders, the slight widening of her eyes.

Reyes added, "We believe that William Villette has kidnapped a federal agent. The agent is Adeline Villette's son."

Coburn's head went back. Not what she'd expected. She smoothed the veins on the back of her hand with the other thumb. "So it's Willy you really want to know about."

"And his victims, yes."

"When Willy was thirteen, he was hit by a thrown bat while playing baseball. It fractured his skull. He was in the hospital for three months, but he made nearly a full recovery."

"Nearly?" Brady asked.

"He had some mild learning disabilities. I know they weren't enough to keep him back in school. There was a--I think you call it a personality change."

Just the sort of thing that gave the anomaly a toehold. But if Tyler County had had a thirteen-year-old gamma with the ability to project emotions, everyone would have known it. William Villette would have terrorized the place.

"Will you tell me now what's happened to Addy?" Coburn asked.

"She died eighteen years ago," Reyes said mildly. "I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "They aren't supposed to die before you."

"No, ma'am." Reyes sat up. "You might be able to do us one more favor."

"Yes?"

"Do you have a photo of Adeline Villette?"

Coburn smiled. "Agent Reyes, I have thirty-five years of the high school yearbook. Which picture would you like to see?"

"The last one, please, Ms. Coburn."

She rose and went to one of her glass-fronted bookcases. It took her only a moment to decide which of the thin leatherette-bound volumes she wanted; when she had it, she opened it, flipped a little, and brought it to Reyes. Brady stood and sidled up to look over his shoulder.

He remembered senior-year portraits. This one was the old-fashioned sort, taken by the same photographer as all the others on the page, against the same neutral background. Addy Villette had thick, dark, heavy-looking hair, turned back from her face on both sides in Farrah-Fawcett wings. Her face was thin, and her smiling mouth was long, like Chaz's. Her eyes were like his, too, wide and dark, but in black and white, Brady couldn't tell if they were the same color. She wore a boat-neck sweater that showed the little cross on a chain settled in the hollow between her collarbones.

Long dark hair, dark eyes, thin. The room hadn't been cold until then.

*

Besides whatever Hafidha needed--the laptop more or less set itself up, as far as Falkner could tell--all they had to do to turn the fire crew's trailer into headquarters was to unfold a few extra chairs and drop the box of files on the table. Hafidha, Todd, Lau, and Worth slid out of the Yukon before she had the engine off and jogged toward the trailer.

Falkner opened the driver's door and found Mike Pelletier waiting for her.

"Agent Falkner. One of the crews--" The muscles in his jaw said he'd set his teeth. Air whistled in through his nose. "We've got two more bodies."

After a certain amount of horror, one stopped reacting. And she'd half expected this news, after all; there'd been more than one anomalous turn in the fire's progress, and Villette seemed to have no trouble separating his victims from their sense of self-preservation.

"Any sign they were starting a new fire?"

"Hard to tell," Pelletier said. "There was pieces of glass, might have been a jar. We're sending 'em off to the lab to see if there's residue. Maybe gas, maybe paint thinner--every kid in a county like this knows what's flammable and what isn't."

"Kid," Falkner repeated. The fire camp seemed to recede around her.

Pelletier nodded. "Maybe thirteen years old. From the size."

*

Hafidha plunked down at the end of the table and got her link up while the others were still sorting case files. Just in time for her phone to ask "Ehh, what's up, Doc?"

"WTF, Smokey Bear division," she answered.

"Hafidha." Reyes's voice in Hafidha's earpiece was metallic and flat. It wasn't just the connection; she'd heard it that way in person. Her stomach turned skittery. "Put me on speaker."

She made the phone talk to the laptop, and cranked the built-in sound. There ought to be a way to get better audio, for times like this... *Focus, princess. When he sounds like that, there's hamburger on the highway.*

"You're on the air, caller. Todd, Lau, and Worth in the house. Es is outside with the fire chief."

Across the table, the other three raised their heads like dogs at a whistle.

"Go back to the local hospital records," Reyes ordered. "Emergency room admissions for second half of January, beginning of February, 1982."

He still wasn't used to how fast she could do this; he was slow-pitching the search parameters. She had the admissions lists for those four weeks, divided by hospital, on the screen by the time he inhaled. "Who am I looking for, *Jefe*?

"Adeline Villette."

And there she was. "Got it. What do you--"

Then she read the record, the attending physician's statement. He hadn't asked, but she combed local police calls for that night, found the responding officer's report.

"She was raped," Reyes said.

"Yes, boss." It came out as a croak. Her eyes flicked to the others; Lau and Todd looked fierce. But Worth's expression was weird, unsettled and a little scared.

"Give me the details."

"January 31st, 10:46 p.m., brought in by...her mom, looks like. She was... there are photos." God, she looked like Chaz. Pretty determined genes, those. Chaz if he'd been hurt, and hurt, and--no, bad. "Bruises, one eye swollen up, cuts inside her mouth from..."

"From her teeth. She was injured, beyond the penetration itself?"

Hafidha's hands shook. "Have... have you seen *Fight Club*? She must have kept getting back up."

"Did the police take a statement?"

"She wouldn't say who it was. The responding officer and the doctor both thought the mother didn't want her to, but she was a minor, so there wasn't much they could do. But it couldn't have been William--her brother, because she wouldn't have fought back. The others didn't."

"Unless he wasn't a host yet."

"She wasn't raped by the anomaly," Todd said, hoarse. "She was raped by her *brother*."

"January 31st?" Worth repeated.

Hafidha was about to verify it when Reyes said, "And he's been on time ever since."

Worth turned a nasty color and closed her eyes.

"What?" Hafidha asked, just as she figured it out.

Nine months later. Chaz's birthday.

Act V

As he huddled in the darkness, waiting, it occurred to Chaz that if he could reach the glass-topped table, he could tip it over and try to shatter the glass. And if he could do that, and get his hands on a sharp enough shard, he might be able to cut off one of his thumbs.

It was the damned thumbs keeping his hands in the shackles, like a monkey's fist in a jar trap. If he got one hand out, then he could get the loop of chain off the free end, and the shackle would just be hanging off one wrist. If he made it back to civilization, he could probably even get the thumb sewn back on.

It was cowardice, but he was sort of glad the table was all the way across the room.

He licked the drying blood from the back of his right wrist. The flesh was puffy over the bones, a fluid kind of tautness when he probed it with the tip of his tongue. The swelling was inside the joint capsule, then. His fingers wiggled, though moving them made him gasp. That didn't mean it wasn't broken; plenty of people fractured a wrist and never knew it until ten years later, when the arthritis set in.

And it wasn't as if being able to use his fingers was doing him any good at all.

Finally, car tires crunched on the drive. He supposed he should have felt something--apprehension, relief. He wasn't sure. And whatever it should have been, he didn't feel it. He didn't feel anything but empty, very cold and very still. Maybe his prayers had been answered.

Maybe he was dying.

Well, if God could only listen to him once, he guessed this would have to be the time.

Footsteps, and the door, and the light. And more footsteps. The dining room light swelled to dim brilliance and he heard someone curse. Softly, disbelievingly, a man confronted with unexpected disaster. Then a hasty rustle, a thump. The grocery bag set down by the arch. More footsteps, both hasty and hesitant, and the emotional pressure of a body beside him, and the bite of smoke in his nose as strong as if the fire's backtrail was fresh in the room.

The Relative wasn't projecting; was trying to withhold, if anything, but the leakage lashed at him anyway. Grief. Guilt. Horror, worry, sorrow.

Funny how all those words for bad things had that oh-ar-sound, wasn't it?

"Oh, baby boy," the Relative said, and lightly stroked his face. "Oh, sweetheart, what did you do to yourself?"

Not meaning to, he whimpered in relief. The Relative bent over him, touching him gently, exploring his skull and patting the length of each arm. "Shhh," the Relative said at his soft pathetic sound of distress. "Papa's here. Papa's here. It was my fault, angel. I was gone too long. You thought I left you. I won't ever leave you. Forever and ever. I'll always be here. Papa's here, angel. Papa's never going away again."

This time, the horror was his own, as far as he could tell anymore what emotion belonged to whom, and it came because his heart swelled with reassurance at the words. Then the Relative was moving, stepping to the kitchen, running water. When he came back it was with the bucket and cool cloths, to wash the blood from Chaz's hands, clean his face, cool his bitten lip. The Relative rose again and dimmed the light, fetched something, came back. He felt the tears leaking, sniffled, bit his thumb savagely until the

physical pain slashed through his sniveling, let him get a single choking breath.

The Relative was beside him, tending him in the dim light reflecting from the great room, sliding the folded blanket beneath him and lifting his head to rest upon the Relative's thigh. He sobbed on a breath, and the Relative's hands gentled him. He cupped water to Chaz's mouth; when he wouldn't drink, the Relative bathed Chaz's face with it. The second mouthful, he took, and the third, and then he sobbed again, hard enough that he tasted more blood.

"Hush, angel," the Relative said. He choked, sniffling hard himself, and wet splashed Chaz's cheek. "It's all right, baby boy. Jesus wept on the cross. It's no shame. God's will is hard, it's hard, but angels are strong enough to bear it. And you'll never be alone again."

The Relative was crying.

Crying for him. For his pain and his suffering.

And then--softly--singing. Stroking his hair, his shoulders, drawing a second blanket up to cover him. *Hush little angel don't you cry. Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird don't sing, papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring. And if that diamond ring turns to brass, papa's gonna buy you a looking glass.*

And if that looking glass gets broke, papa's gonna buy you a billy goat--

Softly, gently, singing, the Relative bathed his face, stroked his hair, gave him water to drink in tiny palmfuls. Wiped the tears from his face when Chaz broke, and wept.

Held him, and bathed him in love and adoration, and told him he would never be alone again, and everything would be all right.

It had been eighteen years since anyone had touched him that way. Soothing, sweetly, promising to be there in the morning.

He knew the price was his soul.

He sighed, and closed his eyes.

*

There came a time when even Nikki Lau had to get out of the confines of the trailer and go for a walk. Not for fresh air; even wearing one of Worth's paper masks the smoke burned her lungs, and she was pretty sure there was no fresh air to be had anywhere in Tyler County. But just to get away from the others, who were huddled over heaps of paper and computer screens and telephones, oozing stress hormones and fatigue toxins, pretending that terrible things hadn't come home to roost and might be bringing their friends.

She stood, arms crossed, back to the bustle of the parking lot as another rig came in for refueling. The sky was red in three directions; it wasn't sunset she was seeing.

Chaz, be alive, she thought. It was an article of faith: there were no fates worse than death. "Where there's life," she murmured, squeezing her arms to hold the ghost of her heat against her skin, "there's hope."

Several yards off, a light flared as Pelletier lit a cigarette with a dramatic flourish intended to announce his presence. Lau turned to him, head tilted in inquiry.

"Filthy habit," he said, releasing a stream of smoke through his nostrils.

"A lot of firefighters smoke."

"Tame the dragon," he answered, with a shrug. He flicked his lighter and studied the flame, let it die again just as Lau's pulse began to accelerate. He slipped it into his pocket and patted the pocket to make sure it had settled. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask you something. If you Feds have identified your guy, and you have him pinned down, how come you're still profiling him? What are you hoping to get?"

It was a fair question. She went to bite her nail, and found the mask in the way. "When we get to the house, if our agent is still alive, every bit of information we have about the kidnapper will help us keep him alive. We think we know where he is. Profiling him lets us know what to expect."

Pelletier smoked, silently. Lau knew what he wasn't asking.

"And if there's nothing in the house when we get there--" *nothing except the body of somebody we knew,* "--and William Villette is in the wind, the profile and the victimology will help us find him."

"This guy. He's a little more than a cult leader, isn't he? I mean, I know people will do crazy things for charismatic leaders--"

"He's a little more than that," she confirmed.

Pelletier nodded, and took another drag. "It's the idea he might be--controlling some of my crew. I keep wondering how I would know if somebody like that was getting to me."

Pelletier had guts, of course. But it took a particular sort to be willing to understand and accept what Shadow Unit hadn't quite told him about his secondary fires.

Lau shook her head. "Are you trying to warn me of something, Mike?"

He laughed, and his shoulders relaxed. "I'll watch you for crazy if you watch me--oh, damn."

"What?"

"Is your boss inside?"

"Falkner is." Lau jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "Reyes is on an interview. Do you need me to fetch her?"

"Yeah," Pelletier said. He pinched the butt out and slipped it into his pocket. Lau hoped he washed his own clothes, or his wife was a chainsmoker. "The south side is going to burn itself out sometime early tomorrow. If he wants to keep us out, he's going to have to do something to maintain a barrier there, isn't he?"

"Your crew," Lau said, cold filtering out from her belly.

"There aren't any civilians in the area," Pelletier said. "They're his only option."

*

Brady had the overheated, brittle-at-the-edges feeling he got at the end of twenty-four sleepless hours. The rising sun edged the eastern horizon with red like an open wound.

Reyes, of course, showed no weakness. Brady had been with the unit long enough to know it was show, however smooth and shiny.

"Think there'll be a flat surface at the fire camp nobody's using? I don't know about you, but damn, I need some Zs."

Reyes didn't look away from the road. "Drop your seat back. I want to make one more stop."

"What for?"

"William Villette's hospital records."

"It's ancient history. We know enough."

Reyes glanced over, just long enough for Brady to see the bleak expression. "We never know enough."

Brady sighed, and didn't lay his seat back. You didn't let a guy solo when he looked like that, even if it was Reyes, and nothing worse than a hospital records department.

*

Sometime in the night, the Relative had tucked Chaz's blankets around him, slipped away, and gone to bed. On the morning of the fifth day, he woke with his tongue swollen in his mouth, his hurt wrist swollen in the manacles, and thought, quite lucidly, *They are not coming for me.*

He'd been waiting a long time, and if Reyes and the team were coming, they would have come by now.

Of course they weren't. They never could have been. He'd lost them. It was only justice. Retribution.

He hadn't gotten help in time for his mother, and now the help would not come in time for him. This was as it was meant to be. This was how he was always supposed to die.

It was die, or become William Villette's son. William Villette's shadow.

And he would be damned if he'd let that happen.

Correction. If he let that happen, he *would* be damned.

The Relative could break him. Everybody breaks. Winston Smith. Evey Hammond. Jesus, as the Relative had so helpfully pointed out, on the cross.

Everybody breaks.

The Relative could kill him. He could break him. But he couldn't *transform* him, not without his help.

It would be better to die himself than to live a monster. It would be better to be dead than be like William.

Well, then, he'd do it right. William might be able to make him do almost anything else, but barring a nasojejunal tube, he couldn't make him eat.

He'd been hungry before. Hell, he'd been hungry for days. And as weak as he was, it couldn't take long.

There were worse things than starving to death. After all, he had a list in his head.

She would--the *team* would be proud of him if they knew.

And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

Continued tomorrow...

Day 6

Falkner grabbed two hours of something like sleep on the back bench seat of one of the Yukons. She put Worth on the same shift, and Lau; Todd and Hafidha could hold the fort, and knew the difference between what they could field and what they had to call her for.

Reyes and Brady came in with the other vehicle just as the angry sun cleared the horizon. Revelations was a Christian book, but in their line of work, they couldn't help but know the end-of-days icons. The sun didn't rise in blood every day of the week.

Brady had that healthy-animal resilience, but Reyes looked drained. "Have you slept?" she asked him.

"No."

"Can you?"

"I'll go try." He showed her a humorless smile. "They don't pay you enough."

"Not by several orders of magnitude."

Her back hated her. Too damned bad. She stumped up the metal steps and into the trailer.

Inside, the smell of fresh coffee arm-wrestled the smoke. Worth had passed out paper masks, so they wouldn't all be breathing soot (where did she find these things on the fly? But she did), but Falkner noticed that no one seemed to think they needed to wear them in the trailer. Well, maybe they didn't.

Hafidha was updating fire progress on her monitor; the satellite images refreshed square by square, a puzzle of pieces in black, gray, orange, and dark pine green. She'd figured out some kind of image processing that filtered the smoke and extrapolated what was happening on the ground beneath it. Brady sat with elbows on the table, the heels of his hands dug into his eye sockets. Todd was curled up in a corner with his jacket over his head.

Hafidha saw where her eyes went. "I told him to. I'll wake him up if I need him."

In fact, Todd rolled over and pushed his jacket away. "Dereliction of duty," he admitted, rusty-voiced.

Falkner shook her head. "Grab it when you got it." War zone rules were now in effect. She poured coffee into a styrofoam cup, held it out to Hafidha, who shook her head, then Todd, who scrambled to his feet and took it from her. She poured herself another. "Brady, any more to report from last night?"

He shook his head without raising it. "Villette's medical file's on the table."

"Good. Todd, when Worth wakes up, you and she go through it, see if you can find anything more to suggest what he's likely to throw at us."

"Yeah," Brady said. "Because someday we might even *see* the son of a bitch."

Falkner had known one of them would crack; she'd expected it any time in the last twelve hours. "Brady?"

He rose and slammed his big square fists down on the table. "Fuck this! We go in and get him *now.*"

Hafidha gaped at him. Todd swung his head to watch Brady a little sideways, and set his coffee cup down.

Falkner walked to Hafidha's end of the table; Hafidha scooted her chair out of the way. Falkner turned the laptop so the display faced the rest of the room. "Look at this," she ordered. "Look. There are no safe approach routes."

"This freak has had him for *five days!*" Brady towered over her, staring, mouth working.

Five days. Statistics said they were already too late. Falkner felt her leash slip. "What the hell good do we do if we get in and can't get back out? This is not a God-damned Michael Bey movie!"

In the silence that fell, Falkner thought, *Well. Good thing it happened on my watch and not Reyes's. I can be counted on to stay calm*.

She swallowed everything. "I'm sorry, Brady. I don't like it, either."

"Why, this is Hell," Reyes said. He was leaning in the doorway. "Nor are we out of it."

Pretending intellectual distance probably did him a world of good, so she didn't suggest he shut up. "Thought you were trying to sleep."

"When the fun's in here? Tell me there's hot water."

"Only with coffee in it," Todd said, apologetic. He pointed, and Reyes pulled a cup off the stack.

"I'm going to check in with Pelletier," Falkner said to no one in particular. She was pretty sure Pelletier was off-site.

She wasn't thirty feet outside the trailer before Brady caught up with her. She swallowed her feelings all over again and said, "Forget it. We're all like that right now."

He shook his head. Yes, she'd misread him when he came in. He was like Superman pretending to be Clark Kent, moving as if any gesture could shatter whatever or whomever he touched. "I want this to be over, is all. One way or another."

"It'll be over when we get Chaz back."

"Falkner. Don't do this. You know what's in that house."

Falkner rounded on him and drew herself up. "No, I don't. And neither do you." She bit each word free of the last. "And if you believe otherwise, you'll move a little slower and think a little less hard, and you'll remember for the rest of your life that you didn't do everything you could."

"If he's still alive, by this time..."

"If it were you, would you rather be dead?" *Because if you're going to talk about it, talk about it.*

Brady started to answer, looked away. "I don't know."

That was all she could do for him, short of finding him a threat to fling himself at. She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Go find a corner and get some sleep. I'll wake you if there's news."

He looked her in the eye, long and hard. Then he nodded, dropped his chin, and headed off to the vehicles.

She turned toward the trailer and spotted Reyes leaning near the door, arms crossed, eyes half-lidded, watching. Falkner sighed and walked back. Before she got there, Reyes tilted his head--*come with me*--and started slowly north, through the parking area. She fell in beside him. They walked in silence, until the sounds of the fire camp were an undifferentiated rumble behind them. Until they could say things that required plausible deniability.

"Brady's right," she said, and stared down the road as if there were something to see.

"Mm."

"It's been too damned long, Stephen. You know how little chance we have of finding him alive."

Three more strides. "Maybe that's a blessing."

Falkner forced her next breath out between her teeth. "Not you, too. You know better. There's no fate worse than death."

"Not for him, maybe."

She stopped. "What do you mean?"

Reyes lifted his hands, as if to push the question away.

"No. You've been holding this in...since you heard Chaz was missing." She hadn't realized it, but it was true. "What are you afraid of?"

The air was bitter charcoal in the back of her nose and mouth. She'd forgotten Worth's paper mask. So had Reyes; there was nothing to hide the tight muscles of his face. He looked as if he was struggling against pain.

"I had a theory, back when the unit was just me. It seemed like an impossible job. Serial criminals with anomalous abilities, and not enough resources or manpower to stop them.

"So I thought, what if I do what the BAU always tries to do? What if I get ahead of them?"

Falkner nodded.

"I was trying to profile the anomaly itself, determine how it chooses its victims, what its script is. I collected psychological test scores from almost

a thousand emotionally disturbed children across the country. I was looking for scores that couldn't be accounted for by the testers' conclusions."

"Anomalous results." The dryness of Falkner's tone surprised even her.

"I only found one. A ten-year old male who tested at the bottom of the scale on everything. The testing psychologist wanted to diagnose severe autism, for lack of anything else that made sense. But she'd met the boy. She noted that he was alert, had good verbal skills, and seemed unusually bright."

It couldn't have been. But Falkner was pretty sure it was.

"By the time I found those scores, they were three years old. Fortunately, there was a lot of follow-up data. In those three years, I could see the boy mastering what he must have been trying for on that first test: to land on the low side of normal."

"Nothing to see here," Falkner said, through a tight throat. "Move along."

"Protective coloration. We've seen it repeatedly in gammas; the host protects the anomaly from detection. I thought I was seeing it again. In a way, I was. But there were no violent incidents, no attempts to harm himself or others. And there was no external manifestation."

"You found a beta."

"Until then, I didn't know there was any such thing."

Falkner tried to imagine it: Chaz struggling not to stand out, not to be singular or brilliant. Moving from one foster home to another, misunderstood, misdiagnosed--my God, almost certainly malnourished--trying to remember who he was while he kept up a facade of being someone else. Thirteen was a combat zone for identity under the best of circumstances.

Rebekah was thirteen. What if she hadn't been Esther and Ben Falkner's daughter, Deb Falkner's big sister, a kid who could count on her family for love and support? What if she'd been alone in the world, and realized that the landscape of her brain was radically different from everyone else's, in a way that frightened the people around her?

Falkner clenched her hands in her coat pockets, tensing against pity. The thirteen-year-old Chaz Villette didn't need that anymore; he was gone.

"The one thing I knew for certain about the anomaly was that, sooner or later, it did harm. In those test scores, I was looking for the effects of stress on disturbed kids. It occurred to me that in that boy, I might be seeing the anomaly in an incubating form."

"What?"

"That might be what betas are. Apply enough pressure, enough stress, and the anomaly takes control. They turn."

"You don't still believe that."

"I don't know what's happening in that house. But if Chaz is alive... He may not be Chaz anymore. When we get there, we have to be prepared for that."

She would never be prepared for that. It was like a summer horror movie, when the nice kid suddenly grows fangs. It was insane.

But she hadn't studied the anomaly as long as Stephen Reyes had.

There was a hole in the story, though. A missing reel in the monster movie Reyes was seeing in his head. The hole in the suspect's narrative always told you the most.

"And after that?" she asked.

"What?"

"After you found him and figured out what was going on. What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

A cold stone in her stomach. At sixteen, Chaz Villette was still in the Clark County foster care system. At sixteen he'd dropped out of school, aced the college placement exams, and gone to Princeton. She'd read his file.

Between thirteen and sixteen...

"You watched him," Falkner said.

"Yes."

"You *left him there*."

"The point was to observe the effects of stress."

"My God." Her breath came hard and fast, as if she'd been running. "You don't test a human being to destruction. You don't do that."

"You know as well as I do how little we have to go on. How many lives are at stake when we don't know enough."

"You stuck him to your web and watched him *twitch*! Do you think it makes it better that you took notes while he did?"

"Falkner--"

"No. *No*." She said it through clenched teeth. "This has nothing to do with the job or the chain of command. This is about human decency."

"It was my call to make. I made the best one I could."

"You found a kid at risk and left him where he could be damaged in order to test a theory! A kid who grew up to join the team. Who watches our backs. Who you count on to save lives, Stephen. Maybe *yours*."

"I recruited him to keep an eye on him."

"You recruited him because you needed what he does. Don't try to bullshit me. I know how it's done, remember? And if you're keeping an eye on him, *how did he end up trapped in a house with a monster?*"

She'd silenced him. She ought to feel good about it.

"If anything goes wrong," she said, softer, her voice shaking, "if you're right, and he turns, one of us will have to blow his brains out. If it happens, I hope to fuck it's you. Because I haven't earned it, and you have."

Falkner spun, the gravel at the road's edge rolling under the sole of her shoe, and strode back toward the bustle of the fire camp. When she got there, she kept walking until the sound of it faded again. Then she stood in the grass by the road, clutching her arms, until her breathing was even. She could go back now and pick up the job. They needed her. If her eyes were red, the smoke would account for it.

*

He lay on his side, curled as tight as he could, and thought about the throb in his wrists while he watched the Relative eat a peanut butter sandwich. *It's just fuel. He's like a fire: he doesn't care what he consumes.*

And he consumes everything he touches.

It should be easy now. He had a plan, a course of action. Resolution ought to carry him over the rest of the trial. He couldn't figure out how to communicate the resolution to the meatware, though, and his body kept telling him and telling him, *We're starving to death. Do something*. He wished he could explain that was the point.

He didn't want to die. But he didn't know how else to fight. And he didn't know how to stop fighting.

He was so tired. Earlier would have been better, for the fighting. Back when he'd had a bright, sharp edge on his brain and knew how to use it. His mouth felt like paper and dry sponge, and he could practically hear his muscle tissue being eaten for emergency rations. But he could do this.

He needed to do something, and this was the thing that he could do. Because the heart was muscle, too. And when his body consumed enough of that muscle, the heart would stop beating.

Oh, Chazzie, he said to himself, in Daphne's voice. *You really fucked yourself up this time.*

That was just torturing himself. He was never going to hear Daphne teasing him for his ineptness again, any more than he was ever going to hear his mother singing. He could pretend, but they were from different worlds now: one gone on ahead, the other in the process of being left behind.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1. ~~It could be winter in North Dakota.~~ (No; freezing to death was supposed to be not too bad.)
2. Waterboarding.
3. Rats.
4. Snakes.
5. Roaches/maggots.
6. I could be sitting in pee. Or vomit.
7. He could be nailing parts of me to things
8. Home surgery

9. ~~Poison~~
10. ~~Concussion/head trauma/brain damage~~
11. He could cut off my feet.
12. Ditto hands
13. Blinding
14. Flaying alive
15. ~~Impaling~~ (He wasn't sure, but he thought it was faster than starving to death. Probably hurt more at the outset, though.)
16. ~~Vivisection/disembowelment~~ (Also pretty fast, when it came right down to it.)
17. ~~Disfigurement~~(Well, within limits; he'd once held a set of scene photos showing what was left of a junkie who thought it was a good idea to cut off his own face with a knife and feed it to his pet dogs. That victim had lived. Chaz suspected he would rather not. But he could spare an ear or something. Or fingers. Duke did okay with a couple of missing fingers--)
18. Emasculation
19. ~~The house could burn down~~ (Working on it, thanks.)
20. ~~Blood eagle~~ (Okay, icky and horrible. But how long *could* you live with your lungs pulled through your ribcage from the back? Not long, Chaz would guess.)
21. ~~Boiling in oil~~ (See 22.)
22. Extensive second-degree burns. ~~Third-degree burns.~~ (He'd realized on consideration that third degree burns would kill him fast, under these circumstances. And that they wouldn't hurt after the initial pain of the nerve tissue being destroyed.)
23. Breaking on the wheel
24. Stretched on the rack, iron maiden, etc.
25. ~~Death~~

Across the room, the Relative finished his breakfast and went into the kitchen to wash his hands. He came back with the water bucket, set it down, lowered himself to the floor beside Chaz. With a father's tenderness, he stroked Chaz's hair and shoulders, murmured his filthy endearments, laid his hand on Chaz's cheek. "Do you want some water, baby boy?"

He wanted water more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. He could smell it, cupped to his mouth in the hollow of the Relative's palm.

He shook his head, and closed his eyes.

"You need to drink, baby boy."

"I don't need nothing," Chaz said.

Water splashed his face as the Relative jerked away; he kicked Chaz accidentally, and Chaz couldn't be bothered to protest.

But he did open his eyes, and saw the Relative crouched over him, eyes wide and staring. "Addy?"

Chaz thought. It was hard, like remembering what you had done five minutes ago when you were really drunk. *Disoriented. Disorganized thinking*. But he was pretty sure what had come out of his mouth just then was his mother's tones, and not his own. *Huh,* he thought. *I guess I can do Tyler County after all.*

He thought, *No. You can't have her. I can't stop you from having me. But you can't have her.*

She got away.

"Just me," he said.

Chaz closed his eyes again. After a while he felt the Relative move away.

The passage of time was hard to track; that, too, was like being drunk. He couldn't tell how long it was before the Relative came back and sat down beside him. "Papa's good boy. Papa's sweet angel. I brought you a treat."

Chaz heard the crunch of apple's flesh under the Relative's teeth. The fresh, honey-sharp scent filled his nose, the moist edge of the bitten-off piece brushed against his mouth. Now he couldn't lick his lips; the taste of juice might defeat him.

He turned his head away and thought about concentration camps, hunger strikes, political prisoners. Once upon a time, prisoners were starved to death as a form of capital punishment. It was called *immuration*. There were a lot of things that were worse.

"Don't you want to eat, sweetheart?"

It was easier not to answer, not to lie.

"Brave angel," the Relative said, and stroked his hair, and sat with him a while.

And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Continued tomorrow...

Day 7

Act I

When Todd came down the rickety steps of the trailer, the sky was graying--or maybe he should say yellowing--overhead. The light of morning came down a sickly brownish gold, as if from mercury vapor lamps, and unless he had known what way east lay, he wouldn't have been able to tell the orange flare of filtered sun from the reflected glow of fires.

He paused to adjust his mask, not that it did much for his streaming eyes or the fact that the entire world smelled like a billiards-hall ashtray, and located Falkner and Lau standing in a ragged triangle with Pelletier. How convenient.

With brisk steps, hands jammed into his pockets against the predawn chill, Todd crossed cracked asphalt and gravel to join them.

Pelletier sidestepped to open the circle, and Falkner pinned Todd on one of her quizzical stares, that made her look not so much like Emma Thompson as somebody Emma Thompson might play in the movie.

He said to Pelletier, "State patrol at the intersection of 1943 just radioed in. The fuel truck is on its way; they let him through the roadblock five minutes ago. I told your op I needed a walk, and I'd bring out the news."

"Thank God," said Pelletier. "The pumps are about sucking mud. Did they give an ETA?"

Over the subdued comings and goings of the weary fire crews, Todd heard a growing rumble down the highway.

Lau said, "That's probably him now."

He turned to look. It was a pretty straight stretch of road, and though the morning had brightened enough that he couldn't see a cone of light, he could make out the flash of headlamps and the red running lights on the cab. Todd sighed and rubbed the small of his back. "Do we have clock on the go yet?" he asked Falkner.

She shook her head. "We'll head out to the fire line and vulture it from there. Reyes has gone on ahead with Worth; Pelletier had a bright idea that Villette might pop by and bring the hand crew refreshments. He's prepped

his guys to keep an eye on each other, but Reyes wanted some of ours onsite if it went down."

Todd lifted his chin to catch her attention, and her eye. He raised his brows, a silent question. *How much did you tell him?*

She answered with a shrug. *He figured it out on his own.*

"I'll go tell Brady to grab his kit," he said. "You want your vest?"

"Toss it in the truck," she said. "I'll dress on the way. Lau, go tell SWAT to meet us there."

"Roger," Lau said, and jogged off in the direction of the trailers.

Todd turned away, thinking that the difference between real life and stories was that most of real life was filler. As he turned, though, he squinted into brilliant light.

The fuel truck topped the insignificant rise a quarter mile off, caught enough hard air that Todd saw the lights bounce when it landed, and whined shuddering thunder as the driver upshifted, accelerating off the hill.

Sol Todd had seen his share of wrecks, and attended a few as a guest of honor. Including the time he laid his second Harley down under a flatbed broadside, and never knew how it was that he didn't end his days a fine red mist. Saved for bigger and better things, he'd thought at the time. Pulled out of the fire mid-chapter so he could find his chopping block at the climax.

"Guys," he said, in a calm and interested voice. "He's not gonna stop."

Falkner and Pelletier turned as one, saw, assessed, broke without comment into dead runs on different vectors. Pelletier running toward the equipment and men gathered by the pumps, Falkner shouting into her cellphone as she bolted for the trailers lined up beside the road.

Hafidha and Brady were in there. And a dozen of the fire and law enforcement team.

Todd had one foot lifted to follow her when he jerked to a stop and spun himself around on the ball of his foot, doing the math in his head. Quarter mile. Fifteen seconds. Less if the truck was doing over sixty.

One wasted already. Two as he turned. Three, and he was sprinting, dug in head down and running blind for the convenience store, past a tanker that was roaring to life, pulling away from the pump as men scattered in all directions. He sidestepped a smoke-stained firefighter who tried to grab his arm as he pelted toward the building.

Four. Five. Six.

The glass doors caught the light of the headlights, reflected the roar of the abused engine. Seven. They opened out, dammit, another second lost. Eight, and he plunged through, the eyes of the woman behind the counter glittering as she looked up. Nine. She had one hand up; he grabbed the wrist in both his and hauled her up and over, though she probably had fifty pounds on him. Ten.

Not enough time. She didn't land on her feet, stumbled when he heaved her up. Eleven. "Come on, *come on!*" He had her up. Twelve. She was moving. "Back door, back door!"

"This way--" Now she had him by the shirt sleeve, dragging. He followed, pushing her forward, thirteen, a stockroom door--

The crunch of something enormous rolling over metal was the last breath of warning they got. Todd pushed--to the left, not in a direct line, shoved her down, fell atop her as the door began to swing shut.

He never remembered hearing it blow. Maybe the shock deafened him. He felt the heat, though, and the way the tile floor rose up and slammed him in the mouth. "Oh, *fuck*," the woman under him said, as Todd pushed himself off. Gingerly, he touched his back, expecting shrapnel, blood, burns.

Nothing.

Jesus.

Texas and fire. The story of his life.

As he helped the civilian to her feet, Todd could not help but think, one of these days, all of this karma was going to come due.

She led him through the loading door beside the bathroom, where they could see the damage to the front of the store. Glass blown inward, frame

burning, flaming debris on the floor. Where the clerk had been standing was glass knives and burning puddles. Lakes of flame.

They dragged each other outside, into Gehenna. Somebody screaming, somebody else shouting orders, the smell of burning gasoline and barbecue. The civilian stumbled when she saw it, but Todd kept her moving, pulling her toward the trailers. The explosion, he realized, had only been the tanker; the superstructure over the pumps was burning, but the storage tanks--nearly empty, by the grace of whatever trickster god watched over Solomon Todd--had not yet gone.

His luck or someone else's, he didn't plan to stay around long enough to find out. The ESRs were scrambling to evacuate; one charged toward him. The trooper liaison, a petite blonde woman whose face was smeared with greasy soot. "Sir, this way--"

"Here," he said, and shoved the civilian into her hands. He didn't see Falkner over by the WTF trailer, though he caught a glimpse of Brady silhouetted in work lights clearing the metal steps in a bound, Hafidha right behind him with her laptop case. "Get her some medical attention. Get somebody to radio the roadblocks and warn them. I need to find my lead."

Falkner. Would have turned back to see to injured near the pumps. Oh, please god, not that. He turned, scanning for her. A tall figure, angular in her black flapping duster. Silhouetted, there. Pushing against the fire.

Toward the burning tanker. What was left of it.

"Esther, don't you fucking dare."

He must have said it out loud, because the trooper jerked back, then gathered herself and pulled away, taking the civilian with her. Todd broke into a run again, asphalt jarring his knees and hips. He caught up with Falkner where the fire had stopped her, the heat so intense he could see her eyelashes curling as she forced herself another step forward.

"The driver," she said, eyes huge in a face black with soot.

"No chance." He pulled her arm. She resisted. "Goddammit, Falkner. *No chance*. Do you hear me? *There are fucking underground tanks.*"

She hadn't realized, or if she had she'd thought they'd already gone. She let him turn her. He dragged her into a staggering run. She surged ahead of him on longer legs, hauling him after, among the vehicles, firefighters throwing people willy-nilly into tankers and squad cars, Hafidha in the back of a cruiser behind the mesh, Brady shouting an EMT into flight on foot, Lau sprinting for the open door of the SWAT truck, it all making slightly less sense than the fall of Saigon.

He held onto Falkner's arm until she crammed herself into the driver's seat of one of the Yukons, and dove into the shotgun seat. "Get in," he yelled to a passing Statey; the trooper shoved the nearest bystander into the rear seat and climbed in on top of him. Falkner peeled out while the door was still open; the cop yelped and snatched his feet inside.

"Get down," she said, and Todd slid low in his seat, knees scrunched up under the dashboard. Behind them, he could see in the side mirror that one of the tankers, apparently having survived the explosion, was rounding to fight the fire.

For the love of anything holy, he would never know why his brain tossed up scraps of song lyric at a time like this. But as Falkner slewed the SUV jouncing down the blacktop, it wouldn't leave him alone. So he muttered, "You bravos had better be ready to fight, or we'll never get out of East Texas tonight--"

Falkner snorted, both hands on the wheel.

"Jesus God," said the cop in the backseat. "Jesus God."

*

The longest minute of Daphne Worth's life was the one between the fireball that rose over the treetops and the blurt of her cellphone.

It was Lau. "We're clear," she panted. "We're all okay. Reach you in under ten. Tell Reyes."

Worth drew a long, hard breath. She looked up to find Reyes, chin tucked like a fighting dog protecting its throat, staring at her. "They're all right," she said. "They're on their way here."

His head dropped as if it weighed too much for his neck, and she couldn't see his face. Then he nodded. "There's heavy equipment coming in to help

the hand crews clear the fire road out to the county gravel. Once we get that far, we should have a shot at the house."

Which was Reyes's way of saying, *Oh, thank God*. "If Villette doesn't put it in someone's head to do something."

"I hope he does."

Of course--if he didn't, he was done protecting the house. And, one way or another, Chaz was gone. She crossed her arms over her ribs, because something behind them hurt.

Reyes looked out toward the green water tankers, the helmeted firefighters doing purposeful, incomprehensible things. "The crews have been briefed. And the fire line's too long to police it all. We have to count on them to watch each other."

"You know they hate that." Worth said carefully.

"I also know they hate arson."

And arsonists. Before she could follow that thought, the second Yukon jounced down the fire road at a pace she was used to seeing on TV over a caption declaring "Professional driver over closed course." It stopped twenty feet back from the Forest Service vehicles. State police cruisers, SWAT, and fire crew trucks trailed it like a cloud of dust.

The Yukon's doors opened, and the team stepped out, rumpled, soot-stained, and grim. Falkner strode across the rough ground to Reyes and Worth.

"Fuel tanker truck," she said. "Villette got to the driver."

"Son of a bitch," Reyes said in a strange, mild voice.

*

At noon, two of the hand crew brought a third firefighter back to the vehicles. They supported him on either side, but he still stumbled. The two who brought him in wore determinedly neutral expressions. Worth thought the side of the third man's face was already swelling.

They hate arsonists. How do we explain that this guy isn't one, no matter what they saw him do? Maybe he could transfer; but he'd never work with these crews again. Another of Villette's victims.

"Accelerant," one of them said. "Got it in time."

Pelletier closed his eyes tight, just for a moment. "Joey," he said to the third man. "Do you remember what happened?"

"I was digging the break," Joey said, words blurred by his swelling jaw. "I don't know why--"

"*Do you know what you did?*"

Joey frowned up at Pelletier. Then his eyes widened, his face went slack. "Oh, shit. Shit. Mike--"

"It's all right," Falkner said, on Pelletier's other side. "It wasn't you. This morning the man we're after made someone *kill himself* to try to slow us down. Nothing you could have done would have stopped this." She turned to the two firefighters who'd brought Joey in. "You may have saved your friend's life. Thank you."

Worth watched the three men's expressions change. She thought, *She made it better.*

I want to be that good someday.

"Let's get this done," Falkner said. "Before he takes another crack at us."

Act II

There honestly is a limit to how hungry you can get.

He was pretty sure he had found it.

At first, his strength had waned drastically. Now he felt better. Light, capable, clear-headed. The desire for food had muffled to more of a constant low murmur, rather than the cramping agony it had been. Thirst, that was bad, but dehydration and an empty GI tract meant he didn't have to beg the Relative for the bucket.

Just not having to beg was nearly worth the discomfort.

He'd been hungry before. He'd been hungry most of his childhood: most foster families didn't believe an eight year old kid really needed to eat like a teenaged boy on a growth spurt, and when he had finally *been* a teenaged

boy on a growth spurt--well, he was lucky he'd had the wherewithal to steal and scam and not get caught.

But this was different. He was choosing to starve, and the simple act of making that choice, terrible as the outcome was, gave him back some shred of dignity and autonomy that made it possible to endure the Relative's blandishments and importunings as if they did not exist.

He consulted his list.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1. ~~Rats~~.(Unless they were actively engaged in eating him alive, at this point, he'd take 'em.)
2. ~~Snakes.~~ (What was a snake gonna do? Crawl on him? Bite him? Even a rattlesnake bite would finish him off now, he was pretty certain, and a coral snake would be a welcome relief. He wondered if he stood a chance of getting lucky with a black widow or a brown recluse.)
3. Roaches/maggots. (Nope, he'd rather not add roaches. He might be willing to *trade* for roaches, though.)
4. I could be sitting in pee. Or vomit.
5. He could be nailing parts of me to things.
6. Home surgery.
7. He could cut off my feet.
8. Ditto hands.
9. Blinding.
10. Flaying alive.
11. Emasculation.
12. Extensive second-degree burns.
13. Breaking on the wheel--

...no, he was out.

At least it would be over soon. He could *feel* his flesh vanishing, as if it were deliquescing. As if he were already decomposing, an animated cartoon skeleton, the bones under his skin struggling to poke through, like children's

fingers stretching balloon rubber. His jeans hung on his hipbones like bloomers pegged to a clothesline.

He had long since passed ketosis, and his body, having converted from a carbohydrate metabolism to fat and consumed his stored energy, was now working through his muscle tissue. When he breathed in, he could smell the reek of his own filthy body--but overwhelming that, a sick combination of acetone and baking bread. Because the human brain cannot metabolize fat or protein, he was undergoing proteolysis. His body was breaking down its own constituent proteins into amino acids--alanine--which it could then convert to glucose. But in addition, he was converting pyruvate into lactate, and breaking down the lactate--lactic acid--into glucose, too.

Lactic acid was one of the substances the symbiotic bacteria and yeast colony in a sourdough starter--like the one he kept in his refrigerator at home--produced in its efforts to make its environment unfriendly for other, less useful microorganisms.

Because he was starving to death, he smelled of baking bread.

He thought of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and farmers eating their seed corn.

This was it.

Poor orphaned sourdough starter. He was letting *it* down, too. Maybe Daphne would adopt it. And maybe his neighbors would take care of the feral cat he fed outside his kitchen window.

Like racehorses and hummingbirds, gammas and betas were engineered to narrow tolerances. Somebody like Chaz or Hafidha--or the Relative--needed upwards of five thousand calories a day just to maintain weight and keep their overclocked brains functioning. Physical activity cost what it cost, and slamming neurons... cost even more.

There was a point at which even if he was alive when the team found him, no one would stand a chance of saving his life. His body would not be able to absorb the nutrition necessary to bring him out of starvation, and he would die of heart failure when the strain of processing calories was placed on his already-critically-stressed system. It was called *refeeding syndrome,* and it usually occurred in patients who had endured famine and privation

for months on end. But nobody knew very much about starvation in betas, and he wondered it he'd already passed the point of no return.

It didn't matter. The team wasn't coming in time, and he didn't have to worry about it for long.

He wondered if he was about to prove that a beta actually could starve to death before dying of thirst.

What an interesting experiment.

Distantly, he was aware of a rattling in the kitchen, drawers pulled open, water running. The Relative must be fixing himself a snack.

He was cold again. He drew his knees up and managed to wrap his arms around them, despite the manacles, which fit better now. Looser, though he still couldn't compress his hands small enough to work them through the gaps. He might be skinny, but he had big bones. He folded himself up like a child jammed into some tiny protective space and laid his face down so his cheeks rested along his biceps. His legs seemed to have more room between his arms, now.

Why was he always cold?

The Relative's shoes crunched on concrete dust over scarred tile. He didn't raise his head. It was too heavy, and his face fit neatly between his bony upper arms, as if he were lying on a massage table. It was comfortable, except for the part where he was thirsty.

And so very cold. How could it possibly get so cold in Texas, in May, even at night? Was it night yet? He didn't think so. It was bright outside, but maybe that was the fire. Wouldn't the roses freeze? He could still smell them, and the smoke. His fingers felt numb, not even tingling. Were they turning blue?

Dying wasn't very much fun.

His heart fluttered, distraught, in the cage of his ribs. Panic? Heart failure? His blood volume had to be dropping with dehydration, and that was another thing that could kill him. The heart would have to beat faster and faster to maintain blood pressure, the body double-clutching, fighting the failing systems.

Gallant meatware. He admired it, even as he wished it would quit.

I'm going there to see my mother
She said she'd meet me when I come
I'm only going over Jordan

Addy believed in God. William believed in God. Not the same God, though: Gods in direct opposition, and who was to say which one was stronger? William hurt Addy, but Addy got away from William. She beat him. Sort of.

Addy Villette ran away from home to make her future over. That didn't turn out so well. But no one in Tyler County ever heard of her again, so at least there was no one to say, "I told you so." Not until her son came back and undid all her good work in getting him away.

The footsteps paused beside him. William stood over him, breathing.

Chaz didn't believe in God. But he thought he would have liked his mom, if he'd ever gotten to know her as a grownup. He thought it would be nice to think he was going someplace where he would see her again.

Then a tender hand caressed his neck, brushing his oil-stringed hair aside. He didn't have the energy to cringe from the touch. *Shh*, the Relative said, soothing, stroking Chaz's shoulders. He dropped to one knee beside him and put a warm arm around him.

It felt good. He wanted to lean into the touch, the warm affection of the man crouched beside him, put his head on William's shoulder and rest. He'd never believed anybody who talked about skin hunger, before.

But now he ached for that hand on his shoulder, and that more than anything told him that the meatware, gallant or no, really needed to hurry up and die. Because if it didn't, he thought he might start doing things to earn that touch. And he would not think about what happened then.

He could smell William--soap and water (he'd heard the shower running before) and peanut butter--over his own reek of starvation. William's hand was warm and soft.

"Hush, little angel," William sang. "Don't you cry. Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird don't sing, papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring--"

I could die now, he thought. *It would be all right. I don't need to do this anymore.*

"And if that diamond ring turns to brass, papa's gonna buy you a looking glass.... Pick up your head, angel. Come on, baby boy, you've done so good. You've been so brave. Just pick up your head for papa. It'll be over soon."

Something stirred him; something other than his own numbness and the starvation ache in his bones. Excitement, anticipation, made his hands shake. Nervousness, as if he was just about to kiss a girl he'd never kissed before, a thrill running down his spine, following the touch of the Relative's damp hand.

"So brave," the Relative crooned. "Thou art nearly purified. Food nor water requireth thee, only the pure fire of the Lord."

Because it was easier to obey, he lifted his head. *If he tried to make me eat now, I would listen. So glad we seem to be past that--*

He saw the ten-inch, black-handled chef's knife in the Relative's hand. He jerked away, hard, knees and elbows tangled.

"No," he said, cringing from the knife as he hadn't been able to will himself to cringe from the Relative's hand. "No, please, you don't have to do this--"

Now would be a good time for that cardiac arrest, he thought, scrambling to the end of his chain.

"Oh, baby boy," said the Relative, more sad than angry. "I thought you were ready." He rose easily and stepped back, the knife hanging by his thigh. It was good steel, the edge curved by sharpening. Chaz's grandmother's best kitchen knife, no doubt. It had that kind of look: a tool well-cared for, well-used, and well-loved.

He still felt the triumph, the excitement. But now it was tinged with sadness and exhaustion. The Relative was tired. Why did the boy have to make everything so *hard?*

"So be it," the Relative said, and stepped away.

Wherever the Relative went after he placed that knife on the far edge of the dining room table, it was out of Chaz's line of sight. But he could hear him moving through the house, opening doors, pulling open closets. He tried to

struggle up; light as he felt, it should have been easy, but his knees buckled. He might have been able to manage it if he'd been able to push himself with his hands. As it was, he fell back to his knees, head bowed, and drew a series of shuddering breaths while he waited.

There were worse things than dying on your knees.

Like whatever the Relative was planning on doing with that knife.

He thought about his list, and wondered if you really could manage to swallow your own tongue without a gamma's assistance.

When the Relative came back, walking softly, talking to him in nonsense words--as if to a wary animal--he held something looped casually in his left hand, nearly out of sight behind his leg. A length of leather, part black and part brown, a shiny buckle marking the place where one color turned into another.

He blinked. His eyesight had gone kind of funny, but he finally made sense of what he was looking at. It was a man's dress belt. No, two dress belts, each about an inch wide, buckled together to make a six-foot leather strap with a loop at one end.

When the Relative lifted Chaz's chin, still crooning, and dropped the loop over Chaz's head, he meant to fight, but it just didn't happen. Cool leather settled against his collarbone, the tail of the belts falling between his shoulder blades. A gentle tug snugged the noose tight around his throat.

It was a technique prison rapists used to control their victims. He found himself shaking, shoulders hunched, belly sucked in, his whole body rattling with a terrible incapacitating trembling like a dog abused beyond reason. *Psychological effects of starvation include hysteria and depression*--but telling himself that didn't help. It didn't help the thrill of keen expectation that ran through him, or the cold terror of knowing that emotion wasn't his own.

I'm going to feel it when he kills me. Whatever it is to him, sexual thrill, exaltation, communion with his god. I'm going to know all about it.

He closed his eyes--*Well, maybe it will hurt less*--and opened them to the sound of grinding. The Relative was dragging the heavy glass-topped table away from the wall, backing it up one step at a time. He struggled--the glass

was an inch thick, and the table probably weighed close to what he did--but in steady jerks it came closer, and when a little space had opened behind it, the Relative slipped between the table and the wall and pushed.

It went faster then.

The Relative didn't stop until the edge of the glass was level with Chaz's eyes. *I could try to tip it over now.* But he didn't have the strength. Hell, he didn't have the strength to get to his feet.

The Relative retrieved his knife, tucking it through his belt in back, and came around the table to catch Chaz by the elbows and haul him up. "Upsa-daisy, sweetheart."

Leather swung against Chaz's spine and buttocks; cracked tiles pressed sharp on the soles of his feet.

"Step forward--"

He did, because the choice was to be shoved. The chain dragged between his legs as the Relative guided him forward and bent him over the table. Then the Relative stepped on the chain, pulled it taut, jerking his upper body forward over the tabletop. It hauled his hands down painfully, the manacles striking the bones of his hands and his lacerated wrists as the table caught him across the inside of the forearms. Hard enough to bruise, maybe hard enough to break his newly-fragile skin.

He didn't mean to scream. But the Relative kicked his legs wide apart, and their combined weight--such as it was--pushed bone against the rounded unyielding edge of the glass, and he couldn't help it.

Not that he could manage a very good scream at this point. It was more of a whine, a sharp thready keening.

At least, he thought, *I tried.* And found it funny, until--

Cool leather wrapping his right hand. Resistance as he takes up the slack and brings his hand to the side, holding the sweet boy down. What a good, brave child. Just be brave a little longer, baby boy. God is waiting.

But at the same time, the leather tugged his neck; he gasped, his mouth filling with saliva. Air, he could get air. The constriction was only surface blood flow, venous return from the brain. The Relative wasn't pulling hard

enough to do anything but make him lightheaded, yet, and that, he was already.

The tension on the leash slackened. A hand stroked his hair, the leather strap moving against his shoulders with the gesture. "Be brave, baby boy," the Relative said, full of love and pride and sweet anticipation. "It's hard, but it's got to be done."

If he lifted his chin, strained his neck, he could see the mirrors from here. And so, in the far wall between the flecks of gold, he witnessed the Relative reaching his left hand behind his back to retrieve the kitchen knife.

Ways this could be worse, by Charles Villette, age 25 and a half

1.

The next jerk on the leash was hard and to the side, holding him bent double even without the Relative's weight on his shoulders. He gagged, strings of saliva running down his chin. Drool: his body's response to partial asphyxia. Gallant meatware. Still trying. Where was it finding the moisture? *Sorry to give up on you, meatpuppet. So sorry.*

He might have vomited if he'd had anything to vomit. The knife descended, sharply, with a twist, towards the nape of his neck and his spine.

Missed one, he thought. *Paralysis.*

But the blade only cut his shirt. No pain, just the burn of cloth pulled against his skin, and the sound of it shredding, the dull gleam of the knife blade thrust through his shirt-collar and sawed back and forth until the torn shirt stretched in rags from his waist to the sleeves. The Relative didn't even tear it all the way to the hem. It sagged free of Chaz's back until his emaciated ribs and shoulderblades rose like a Giger monster-landscape from shredded fabric.

His breaths came like individual punches in the gut. He couldn't move air properly because of the leash, because of the table compressing his diaphragm. It didn't matter. He had no pride. There was no percentage in dying well. He whimpered anyway, and words came out. It startled him that they were not a plea for death. "Please. Please, William. You don't have to--

you don't want to do this. You're my dad. You love me. You don't want to hurt me. Please, you don't want to--"

The Relative crooned, "It's only skin and muscle; it can't hurt *you*, angel. I know you're scared, but you won't be, after. Just be brave."

The leash and the chain held him steady. He couldn't turn his head away from the mirror, but he dropped his eyes. No better; all he saw now was his own face reflected transparently in the glass-topped table, his hands pinned underneath it. "Please," he rasped, tears plopping to the tabletop, snot streaking his upper lip, saliva coating his chin.

"Shhhhh," the Relative said. Leaning down, he kissed Chaz's hair.

"Please. William. Daddy. *Please.* Don't cut me--"

In the mirror, he saw the second kiss, the Relative's eyes half-closed, the leash taut in one hand and the knife held well to the left. *I'll struggle. I'll struggle, and maybe he'll miscalculate. Maybe he'll strangle me. It'd hurt, but it's faster than starving. And it would hurt less, I could die before--*

Before he flays me. Before he rapes me. Before he rapes me with the knife.

"Please. I don't want to feel this. I don't want to watch this--"

Please.

The Relative raised his hand and set the point of the knife against Chaz's back, to the left of the spine, to the right of Chaz's shoulder blade, and level with the top of the bone.

"It's okay, baby. I just have to let the wings come out."

And he felt the Relative's flare of triumph and reverence and glory as the knife came down, the cold skip of the blade across the washboard of his ribcage. Shocking, slicing, incomprehensible pain.

Act III

Worth had taken part in her share of briefings. But this one was uncanny: outdoors under a sallow sky, every breath full of soot and the stink of sodden burned wood, the cops and SWAT officers nervous and shifting in a

landscape that looked like an anteroom of Hell. She wondered if Reyes felt any different than he did in a police station squad room. He didn't look it.

Brady came around the back of the Yukon and dropped against the fender next to her, hard enough to make the big SUV rock. His lips cut a flat line across his face, and he frowned out across the trees toward where the Villette farm must be.

"Soon," she murmured.

He turned his head, an acknowledgement. But his eyes were still focused too far away.

Reyes paced in slow, short arcs before the assembled officers. His voice carried well even in the thick air. "You've received copies of the sketch of William Villette. If you meet him face to face during this operation, he will seem charming, well-spoken, trustworthy--he may even appear helpless. He will not seem dangerous.

"But we believe he's raped at least fourteen women, and convinced at least four people to die to protect him. I know it seems impossible that he could convince you to lower your guard. But he can. None of you are immune. He may turn one of you to use as a shield or a weapon. I know you're all vigilant. I suggest you ramp that up to paranoid."

A rustle of reaction that wasn't quite a laugh; Reyes's audience was too keyed up even for that.

"If Villette is armed, you may not see the weapon until too late. You should assume he has at least a pistol, probably the weapon of the federal agent he's taken prisoner.

"I repeat, you will want to trust this man. The only defense you have is to check your perceptions against those of your fellow officers. And you may not have time for that. If you have to make a quick decision and have any doubts about what you're seeing or hearing, put your safety and the safety of your fellow officers first."

Worth saw movement out of the corner of her eye. It was Falkner, come to stand at the SUV's front bumper. Her face was hard in the apocalyptic light, and her narrowed eyes followed Reyes. Pelletier walked up beside her as Worth watched.

"We should have a clear route to the road in a few minutes," Reyes finished. "As soon as that's confirmed, we'll set out. Get your people ready and wait for my word."

The officers scattered. At Worth's left shoulder, Brady looked down at his hands, closed them into fists and opened them. On her right, Falkner seemed about to speak.

Pelletier cupped his hand over one ear, listened to his earpiece in the other. He looked up at Reyes. "They're through to the road."

*

Metal smell, sugar smell, butcher shop smell, and cold hard turning warm under his cheek. He opened his eyes and saw his own shoulder, red running zigzag down skin-over-bone to pool on glass, the little puddle spreading, under his chin, under his nose. Into his hair.

Something snaked against his throat, was gone. Air cool where it had been.

Get up. Nothing to stop him. Except him. No, *other* him. Where was--

He lifted his head (drip. Drip.) and shifted one foot. He could balance on two feet. Or he could lean on the table, a little. That was the glass.

Just before he pushed upright he had a warning. Careful. Don't.

Too late.

Vocabulary words for pain. Adjectives to modify them. Burning, maybe. Tearing. As if skin and muscle were like his shirt.

The flashes of light and blackness cleared. There he was, across the room, hazy with the smoke and half-naked and painted with blood and trailing mostly-red drapes of shirt from waist and wrists. Wait--the mirror. He remembered that. So that was Chaz, not the one who looked like him.

The one who looked like him (*his name is William*) stood behind his mirror self. William stood behind him, then. (*He said he'd always be there.*) His eyes were wide, lips parted.

Poor sweet boy, he's been so brave. So strong. Come on, now, baby boy. Almost done.

His legs shook, sagged. Weak, filthy, useless, helpless little animal, gagging on pain, sinking under the weight of...

The Chaz in the mirror knelt slowly, reverent under the weight of them, immense, wet, unfolding, each dripping primary pulling free of its neighbor, each feather separate and shining.

The little animal trembled. He heard it whimper. The Chaz in the mirror met his eyes. Awe and wonder choked him, thicker than smoke or blood, hateful, brutal.

"Look, baby boy," said the man standing behind the angel, from over his shoulder. "Beautiful red wings."

They spanned the room. The feather tips brushed red stains on either wall.

*

Four-wheel drive, Falkner thought as she wrestled the SUV over the mauled ground where the bulldozer had wrenched away the burned remains of trees. *Thank God for Texas boys, after all.*

There was no point in being subtle. Like every good farmhouse, all the big windows would face the road, and there was only one way in. And there would be a hell of a lot of their side on the ground: SWAT, state patrol, the two black Yukons. The ambulance, behind the others' protecting shield. They'd go in fast and hard.

It was the right choice, the only one that gave them a chance of getting the jump on Villette. But Falkner knew not just Brady but the whole team were playing worst-case scenarios in their heads that they wouldn't speak aloud. How long would it take Villette to kill Chaz, if he saw them coming and figured he had nothing to lose?

How likely was it that he'd done it already?

We're on our way. Be tough, Chaz. Please be tough.

*

"Oh, baby boy. Papa's beautiful angel. You're going to fly up to heaven and find her for me, angel boy. You're going to strike her down with holy fire. You're going to burn her for what she did to us."

He crouched in his own blood, kept his eyes closed. Righteous love, fury, adoration, obsession. Clear as words. Maybe they *were* words. Maybe William hadn't spoken aloud.

The wings were there. Rustling. He could *hear* them.

He felt them under his fingers.

Shock opened his eyes. In the mirror, William, behind him, brushed the tips of his fingers along the leading edge of one crimson wing. Lightly, lightly. His hands were already red.

He felt feathers beneath his hand. He didn't feel a hand on his feathers.

They're not there. They. Are. Not. There.

Batter through the projection. Harder to do, now. *You can't hurt this much for long. You just can't. The brain won't let you*. In the mirror--there he was, curled over his knees, all agony, weakness, half-naked skeleton fouled with his own blood and tears and slime. Bubbling, whining breath past clenched teeth. Less real than the wet red feathers under his/William's/his fingers.

Then gone, gone in the mirror, nothing left but the holy penitent on his knees under the weight of his reeking wings, so heavy they tore his back, flexing. *I told you you would be an angel, baby. A beautiful angel, full of glory. Papa loves you so much*.

Wouldn't you rather be the winged monster than the dying thing on the floor?

No. No no no no. Oh, he'd taken too long dying. It was too late.

Our father who art in the God-forsaken ruins of his parents' castle torturing his son until he breaks and dies and disappears forever and the magic mirror isn't talking--

The hand could feel the wings, but he couldn't feel the hand. Good. Be hard, smooth as glass. Give back what you're given. Touch, words, thoughts, emotions, light.

He'd seen his face in the tabletop, but he'd been a trick of the light. He'd written his pain and terror and shame on the mirrored wall over and over, day after day, but it didn't stick. When he was gone, the image would be, too.

Glory. Reflected glory. Shrug off radiance and let it burn the retinas of the one who forced it on him.

Rage and adoration reflected back on their source. Nothing left behind in the mirror. There were no wings. No angel. The dying animal was gone. Nothing in the room but a monster with no prey, and his reflection on every hand. Silvered glass returned what it was given and remained unmarked.

Things in the mirror weren't there. Only the mirror.

William Villette stood alone in the image, in the empty room. "Baby boy?" he whispered. Sound bounced off hard surfaces. Confusion and dismay reflected back at him. "Boy?--" louder, to echo back louder. "No. God damn you, *no!* How dare you go to her without me? *I'm not done with you!*"

He stepped forward to straddle the staple and the chain, the red-bladed knife slack in his hand, rage swung like a hammer. It hit, bounced off.

"Oh, Willy," said Addy's voice, with her son's mouth. The mirror of what she *would* have said, God willing. "But by God I'm done with you."

And Chaz, the monster, vanished behind the mirror of his rough new strength, rose, twisted the knife away--combat classes burned into his perfect, futile memory--and lunged.

Breakthrough.

What to? Mirrorshades, broken glass, cutting reflections. The Invisible Man went mad. We only exist because other people see us.

I wonder what kind of monster I will be. Would be. Will you, won't you. Won't survive this. Breakthrough. External manifestation. Thousands of calories to do the job. Don't have 'em. Done for. Burnout.

Thank God. They won't have to shoot me. They'd hate that.

On William's face, surprise, shock, terror. In his mind, battering through into Chaz's mind. *The mirror crack'd*.

Chaz's wings bated, thunderous, spattering blood from feather tips. William twisted and collapsed against the glass-topped table, toppled by Chaz's lunge. Pinions flailed the air, ripping the flesh of Chaz's back.

He clenched his left hand around the knife handle, forcing his broken right wrist to turn, jam into the manacle, palm flat on the end of the hilt.

Thrust from beneath. It's the only way you can reach. Count ribs. He couldn't see William's, but he knew where his own were. Where William's would be. Then just left of center. Daphne had taught him. The manacles dragged at his arms. Stay on target. He pressed the point against skin (there, he felt where it bit, right there) and leaned.

In the mirror, two men struggling. In the mirror, a man and the angel of death. In the mirror, a man and another mirror.

Pop. Crack. *Got it right*. He screamed as the knife slid between their ribs.

The blood that William wanted in Chaz's veins ran out over Chaz's hands. The steel that Chaz wanted in William's heart jammed on Chaz's/William's rib, hitched loose, sank. He felt the meat friction through his hands, the point ripping meat through William's projection.

I won't share this! No choice. He couldn't focus to raise the bright wall again.

William screamed, lips flecked red. *Lung,* Chaz thought, coughing from the steel in his own. *No good. Not enough*. William's big bony fist swept around, caught the bone of Chaz's eye socket. Hard to kill, his kind. Their kind.

Prod with the knife. Fish with it. *Saw*. Rake the wound wider because as long as he felt his chest cavity being churned with a red-hot wire the monster was still alive. What was William's was his, as long as William lived. William clawed at his hands, fighting him for the knife.

High in his back, in his spine, he felt a touch. White-hot, vision blackening, pain like being turned inside out. The blade stuck. Twist. Yank. Snap free as William's hands spasmed.

And slide, at last, into his goal.

Hot blood sprayed his face, his chest, the wall. The wings, probably, red on red. He'd hit the aorta. The pump still throbbed, but the seal was broken.

Not even a gamma could survive exsanguination.

He stumbled backward. He couldn't unclench his hand from the knife; his grip pulled William off the table and onto the floor, and Chaz fell on top of him. He shoved, scrabbled away. He meant to scramble to the reach of the chain, but he dropped before that, slipping in blood. His head banged on the tile.

You'd think, after everything, that wouldn't hurt at all.

He got his elbows under him, then his knees. Wounded gamma. Don't turn your back.

The Relative had stopped breathing, stopped moving. The chest wound no longer bubbled froth and blood. But William wasn't dead.

Because in the mirror, he could see the bloody angel, red as embers, hunched under the weight of his mighty wings.

He squeezed his eyes closed, hard. When he opened them, the wings resolved into the blood-soaked rags of his shirt, stretching from waist to wrists. *More like a manta ray than an angel. Devil fish. Poor manta ray*.

He had to lift his hands off the floor. He had to find the key for the manacles. Before the house burned. Before he died here, in spite of himself.

The Relative's clothes were soaked with blood. His fingers were stiff and numb, and tugging at the wet trouser pockets, inching around for an angle that would let him get his clubbed hands into them, used up most of his strength. He could feel the Relative's thigh through the pocket lining, still warm. He shuddered, and found he couldn't stop.

A ring of keys--house key, car key, a key too small for the padlock. *Please, please let it not be on the kitchen counter*. Then he found it in the watch pocket.

The little key was blood-slick in his clumsy hands. He pinched it in the fingers of his left hand, because he'd have to turn his wrist hard to get at the padlock, and as much as that would hurt when the manacle dug into his scabbed left hand, he knew he'd never get his right wrist to flex at all.

The padlock swung. He braced it against his hip to hold it still. If he braced it on the floor, he was afraid he wouldn't have the will to straighten up afterward.

He couldn't get the key in far enough. Or he didn't have the strength to turn it. Or it was the wrong key.

It took everything he had not to throw himself against the chain howling. Animal hysteria. Use that burst of strength. Grip. Turn.

Click. The hasp popped out. He sobbed on a drawn breath.

He staggered to his feet. The chain snaked to the floor, ringing like bells.

Every time a bell rings--

He lifted his head; in the mirror, the angel straightened. The angel with Chaz's face, covered in blood, cloaked in his stupendous wings.

No. *No.* He clenched his hands on the collar of his ruined shirt and pulled. Hard, short sharp jerks in time to his breathing. Each one tore cloth, tore at his back when the muscles flexed. The fabric was already rent and thin. It let go; his arms flung wide. More blood trickled down his back, curving into the hollows between his ribs.

But the blood-soaked rag was in his hands, inside out, the rolled-up sleeves around his wrists. He balled it up and hurled it, a quick, convulsive jerk. The shirt made a bloody sponge-mark on the wall where it struck. The motion made the slashed flesh of his back gape and pull. The pain made the room tilt.

He's still in me. With me. He'll always be with me.

He promised.

In the mirror, the angel who looked like his father/him raised its head and met his eyes. For a moment, he couldn't tell if it still had wings.

Then it was him, clutching his elbows in his hands to keep his arms still. Just him. What little of him was left. The shivering animal, skeletal as a Dachau survivor, skin washed and hair matted with blood.

He had to get out. The fire was coming. He bent to drag the knife out of the Relative's chest. He might need it, even out in the real world. The Relative's hands were closed on the hilt; he had to knock them away.

He grabbed the hilt and pulled. The blade stuck, the way a carving knife did in a roast when it struck bone. The resistance pitched him to his knees.

Another yank and the knife was in his hand. The tip of the blade was broken off.

He knew where it remained. He'd felt it there.

He picked up the Relative's keys. There was a car or a truck out there somewhere. He could drive to the next farm.

He stood up again. Who knew standing was so complicated? Maybe he couldn't drive to the next farm. He might pass out from blood loss first.

The smoke made his eyes sting; the air was better near the floor.

Walk, Chaz. If you can't walk, crawl. You didn't come this far through Hell to fall down and burn now. Walk, Chaz. Left foot. Right foot comes down on something sharp. Broken tile, broken mirror? Doesn't matter. The smoke makes your eyes run. Doesn't matter. Walk, Chaz.

Walk. Keep walking.

He might not make it long enough to find the car. But he would get out the door, at least. Keep moving forward. Chaz would not die in here, with *him*.

*

The air reeked of blood and sweat and smoke. And roses.

Jordan was steps. Harder than a river crossing. He almost fell. When he reached to catch himself, the pain chastised him: no help with this. Cross by your own strength or no golden fields for you. When he felt grass under his bare feet, the relief made him weak. It might have been gold; hard to tell in that light.

In the field a tall angel with long dark wings and a stern pale face waited. He wasn't surprised, exactly. And if she was stern, she was also merciful, because she pulled the dark wings from her own shoulders and wrapped them around his. Hiding the shame and brokenness. Hiding his filthy horrible dripping wings under her clean soft ones, so no one would know how he fell.

His strength failed him. The angel's didn't.

Act IV

When Falkner first saw the house, she thought it was burning already. The ridge behind it showed fire like the humped back of some breathing orange animal, and the smoke rose in a black wall blotting out the eastern sky. The front picture windows blazed the same orange. It took her a moment to realize it was the reflected glare of the smoke-dyed sun setting behind her.

Her hands were stiff from fighting the wheel of the Yukon over the gravel road, and now the washed-out, overgrown drive. She'd worry about her back tomorrow. Brady jittered in the seat beside her, his knuckles white around the panic bar above the door. He wasn't an easy passenger, but she was a worse one. Right now she needed to feel how far down the pedal was.

"Radio," she reminded them.

Brady jerked his left hand, with the mic on the wrist. "Good."

"Good," Lau echoed in the back seat. Falkner couldn't see her in the rearview, but she didn't need to.

"Falkner," Reyes said in her earpiece, because of course he'd just done the same check with Todd and Worth in the SUV in front of her.

"Good to go," she replied. Nice and steady.

The SWAT teams checked in in her earpiece. No chatter. No need. All they needed was the order.

They slewed to a stop in the overgrown yard like a swarm of bees lighting on a windowsill. The two SWAT vans anchored the center of the line, the Yukons on their right, the cruisers like dominoes dropped in an arc on either side. Hand on the door latch, ready, ready, Reyes, *call it*--

"Go, go, go!"

The doors popped. She and Worth came out from between the SUVs side by side, guns drawn and low. Brady, fast and smooth on the other side of the vehicle. She could feel Lau behind him, solid, sure. Reyes already ahead, because he'd hit his door a second before he called it, always did. Todd would be right behind him, wound tight but granite-stable.

Beyond them on her left she saw SWAT fanning out. "Baker team, take position," said the SWAT leader in her ear--

On the porch of the house, the screen door swung outward.

A tall, thin man stood on the threshold, holding the screen ajar with his shoulder. His head was bent, and what little of his filthy hair wasn't flat and clinging to his scalp hung in his face. He kept his elbows close to his body, but his left hand reached, groped for the wrought-iron railing. The house door slammed behind him as he slid one foot forward, the other.

The sunset through smoke washed him red. No, it didn't. His naked protruding ribs, his spidery arms, his hair, the jeans that sagged on his jutting hipbones, his bare feet-- That was blood.

William Villette would have kept himself fed. It was Chaz.

He stumbled on the steps, caught himself on the railing at the bottom. His other hand thrust out for balance. The sun glared on the blade of a kitchen knife.

In a clatter of metal, the SWAT officers brought their rifles to bear.

Reyes. Order to stand down. Stand down.

Reyes stood in the clear, his gun at high ready, watching Chaz fight another step. His chest rose and fell like a sprinter's.

"It's Chaz," she snapped into her com. At the corner of her eye, she saw Todd pivot, plunge toward the SWAT team. Brady and Lau ran past her like greyhounds to back him.

*

The smoke stung Todd's eyes as he sprang forward, finger registered along the barrel of his unready weapon. Twenty-one feet; twenty-one feet was your advantage, if he had a knife, and if you had a gun. You could cover twenty-one feet in about a second, if you had to.

Every single one of those hard boys was doing that math in his head.

Reyes wasn't moving. When Todd jerked his head sideways for a glance, he saw him standing, weapon ready, staring at Chaz. Not at the house, or the fire. Chaz.

Todd remembered a girl screaming *I love you* out of a vortex of white fire, enough heat to crumble cinderblock. *The worst they do, they always do for*

love. Cold sharp claws pinched his spine between the shoulderblades. He knew what Reyes was afraid of. Chaz, dripping blood, clutching a butcher knife, staggering out of a house with god-knew-what inside.

Reyes wasn't ordering the stand-down. *I am never coming back to Texas. It's fucking Waco all over again.*

Todd turned his back to Chaz, his back to the fire. His face to the armored men and the one woman with their helmet shields and guns. Getting his officer's body in between Chaz and the rifles.

Storm troopers, he thought. Imperial guards. *They're on your side this time, Sol.* Yeah, he'd have a hell of a time getting the irony of that one on the page, if he ever had the balls to write this down. If he were ever enough of an asshole to write it down.

Maybe Chaz would live long enough to sue him, if he did.

Todd got a deep breath full of smoke and shouted hoarsely, "He's a cop, hold your fire, hold your fire, hold your goddamned fire!" He opened himself like a man waiting to be crucified. Lau and Brady materialized, one on either side, arms spread, all of them yelling "It's the vic!" and "He's a cop!"

A fragile wall of flesh and spirit and trauma plates.

Solomon Todd thought of Kent State and stretched arms wide, to ache like wings expanded.

*

Falkner holstered her gun and stepped forward. *Don't run. He doesn't even know we're here. Don't startle him*.

She ran hard into Reyes's rigid arm. His head jerked once: *No*.

Revulsion swept her; she had to clench her fists on her coat to keep from breaking his nose. He wore pity and horror on his face, and guilt, and fear, and it was the last two that were keeping his arm up like a barricade.

She knocked the barricade aside. She didn't do it gently, and the impact stung her forearm. Good.

Chaz stumbled and came down on one knee as she closed in on him. If all that blood was his, they couldn't save him. She couldn't spot a wound. The kitchen knife was still in his right hand, red from end to end. So no, it wasn't all his.

Reyes might not be wrong. She'd get the blade in her stomach.

"Chaz." She held out her left hand and waited for him to see it. She counted eight seconds. Someone was going to take the shot. *Chaz, please--*

He raised his head. There was an arc of blood across his face that echoed the arching canes of the roses behind him. Under it his eyes had retreated into caved-in sockets; the tendons around his mouth showed like porch columns. She didn't think he could see her. He stank of blood and seven unwashed days of fear, and of something sour and acrid and chemical. Acetone. Paint thinner. What the hell?

He turned his right hand over, so the knife lay across his palm, and held it out. Or he tried to; when his arm came forward, his whole face clenched, and he made a hideous wet shuddering sound deep in his throat. The knife slid off his hand.

Then she saw his back and knew why he'd made the sound.

The incisions were long and straight, elongated lozenge-shapes like dressmaker's darts pulled open by the tension of stretched skin. They reached from the top of his shoulder blades to the bottom of his ribcage. Even in the half-light of sunset she could see the layers: skin, a thread of cream-yellow which marked all the subcutaneous fat Chaz had left, the dark wine-red of muscle tissue split and opened to the air. Slick-looking membrane and bone, holy God, at the bottom, like a rack of lamb. His back was smeared and clotted with drying blood, and with the fresh bright rivulets he'd started when he moved.

He was trembling; uncontrollable convulsive shudders, one after another. That was her excuse. But anyone who knew Chaz didn't like to be touched, who saw those two long open wounds, would know they were carved deeper than his back. No one should know that about him.

Falkner yanked off her coat and wrapped it around him, keeping it off the wounds with the bow of her arm. "It's okay. We've got you."

He pushed feebly at the coat, as if he'd shrug it off if he could shrug.

"Chaz. It's okay," she repeated.

She could barely hear the reply. "It's a--" Breath. "--good coat."

"It's just a coat." Some things, at least, could be fixed.

Chaz didn't like to be touched. But she didn't think he'd like to fall over, either. So when he sagged forward she caught him with her left arm, let him sink across her lap like a pietà reversed, his face half-hidden in the crook of her left elbow.

Her radio arm. Well, she had lungs. "Brady, Todd, Lau," she shouted. "Clear the house, *now*!"

Still silence from Reyes. Then this was her op.

She needed Worth. She raised her head to shout, and found she didn't have to.

*

Worth charged forward, awkward from a standing start, wrenching her knee as her foot caught on a tussock. She barely registered the spike of pain, or the redoubling twist when she dropped that knee beside Chaz and Falkner. Was all that his blood? Oh, hell.

"Site's not cleared," Falkner warned. "Keep your head down."

"Like you're doing?"

"Yeah."

Worth couldn't tell if she was joking.

Falkner had him upright, kneeling, face against her arm as she held the coat she'd slung over his shoulders off his wounds. He stank, sweat and filth and oh, god, the sharp smells of nail polish remover and lactic acid overpowering everything. Starvation. Had the bastard fed him at all? She passed a hand beside his nostrils, felt air moving. ABC.

"Chaz," Worth said, "it's Daphne. I'm going to take your pulse, okay? Is there anything I should know about?"

She touched the collar of the coat and he winced and shied away. A rasping mechanical noise came out of him. Triggery. All right then, no pulse from the neck. She drew her fingers back and he made a small sound, a whimper, but it was a *conscious* sound and that was what mattered. "Talk to me, Chaz. Talk, keep talking. You're shocky. Stay with me. I'm going to touch your hand, okay? How are your wrists?"

"Yes," he said. And "They hurt."

She bet they did. She could see the scabs, the swelling, the weeping sores from here. Some movement from Falkner made Worth look up. Falkner was looking at Chaz's wrists, too, and the muscles stood out in her jaw.

The left one looked better, barely. He was so thin she could see the outline of the swollen joint capsule on the right. A sprain, at least. Worth reached out, gently, and when she touched his wrist he tried to extend it for her, to help. His face twisted in pain at that slight motion, and the deep breath he took to compensate seemed to hurt him further. "Just relax, Chazzie, we've got you."

He was trying. She could tell. His pulse was thready, too fast to count with her fingers. Chaz was always cool to the touch, but right now he was chilly, clammy. She caught Falkner's gaze over his bowed head and, forcing her voice light, asked "What's it look like under that coat, Chief?"

"Not bad," Falkner lied, but the motion of her eyes told the story.

Worth nodded. All right then. "Hey, Hero, remember the last time you got yourself fucked up so bad I had to hold your hand in the ambulance?"

She was rewarded with a corner of a smile. "Did not," he whispered.

Thank God; he was still fighting. "Well, I *told* everybody I did. They were jealous."

His eyelids twitched. Sort of a response.

"I want paramedics," Worth said, without raising her eyes from Chaz.

Falkner looked over her shoulder. "Where the *hell* is Brady?"

"Hey Chaz, you still with me?"

"Still here." He lifted his head slightly, as if to turn to see her, and she saw something that scared her so much she thought for a moment it had stopped her heart.

"Chaz. Don't move."

Good boy. He froze like a hunting dog on point, and held himself still, except for the trembling, teeth rattling. And nobody on earth could have prevented that.

Keep your voice soft, Worth. Calm. Conversational. "Chaz, what happened to your neck?" There were bruises, blossoming--fresh--and the two thin chafed lines marked by broken capillaries, about an inch apart.

"Choked," he said, through clicking teeth. "Li--ligature. Belt."

She did not panic, but only because she decided not to. He was talking; that meant the swelling hadn't closed his trachea. He was moving air. That left an equally scary possibility. Again, she reached to touch the collar of Falkner's loaned coat, and though he did what she said and held himself still, a fly-stung shudder ran through him. "Chaz," she said, "I'm sorry. I'm really really sorry. But you have a neck injury, and I'm going to have to touch your throat and face, okay? I need to hold c-spine on you, in case there's spinal trauma. Can you let me do that?"

Pause. Then thickly, "Broken?" No shock, just fatalism. As if he'd expected the worst. As if that wasn't the worst he had expected. Then a whispered confession: "I can't feel my hands."

"That's shock. That's just shock. And I don't think anything's broken, but I need to do c-spine as a precaution, man." *Where the hell is Brady?* "You can do this. You just have to stand up on it."

"Can't." His face was tight as a fist.

"Stand *up* on it, damn you."

He took a shaky breath. "On belay?"

It meant, *My life is on the end of the rope you're holding.*

She had to swallow the hurt in her throat before she could answer, "Belay on." *I will not let you fall.*

He knelt unresisting in Falkner's arms while Worth gentled the collar of the jacket down his shoulders. She would have taken it off him, to get a look at the back wounds, but they weren't pumping blood and he made a thick short keening sound between his teeth when she went to do it, and anyway right now all she cared about was his airway and his spinal cord. Anything else was a problem for the hospital.

When she rested her pinkies on his collarbones, he made the sound again. "I know it hurts." Forefingers under his chin, lifting his head into a neutral position. His ears fit neatly between her first fingers and her laterally stabilizing thumbs. Even over the carotid he was cold.

His breath came in great savage quick rasps. She worried he might hyperventilate himself into a faint.

"Worth," Falkner said, warning.

"I have to," Worth answered. "It's his *spine*."

Falkner bit her lip and looked aside. She cupped her free hand over Chaz's ear and turned toward the house. The voice that boomed out of her made two nearby officers lift in their boots. "Brady, can I bring up the damned paramedics? NOW?"

*

Brady had broken past Todd and Lau, knowing they would let *him* go by, knowing, too, that Falkner and Worth had Chaz, and there was nothing Brady could do for any of them that was more important than making sure of their safety. He'd thought he'd go into the house alone, and he was braced for it--but behind him, now that the guns were no longer trained on Chaz, his teammates were letting the Stateys follow, and Brady wasn't unhappy for the company.

He paused at the front door; touched it for heat. Not that he expected any, but you never knew, and it was the one you didn't expect that got you. He was sweating in his ballistic vest, the trauma plates dragging his shoulders down, a trickle of sweat between his shoulder blades growing into a river. From the corner of his eye he saw a second team go wide, around the side, covering the back doors. Todd's voice crackled in his earpiece. "Ready?"

"Ready."

The door was probably unlocked. Brady smashed it open with a high, hard kick by the doorknob, anyway. He really needed to break something.

"FEDERAL AGENT! FEDERAL AGENT!" Bellowing, the police right there shouting their own warnings, the one immediately on his left a petite blonde with a whipping ponytail and eyes like chipped glass. He wondered what it took to be a cute little state trooper in Texas, and decided he was damned glad she was beside him.

From upstage--right and ahead through the kitchen and what he expected would prove a dining room--came more voices, boots, shouting. The great room was clear, the only sign of violence a meandering row of cranberry footprints across dirty sand-colored carpet, and the rare-steak reek of blood. Under the blood, Brady smelled sour sweat, unwashed bodies, fear.

There could be somebody crouched behind the breakfast bar, and Brady jerked his chin at it. The blonde hunkered, two men behind her at they crossed the archway fast. All three came over the top of the breakfast bar like a row of highly armed Jacks in the box.

"Clear," one reported, and Brady swung around the corner, through the archway, into the dining room.

At first, he couldn't sort what he was seeing, with the vague light and the stench and the reflections. Details emerged, one at a time. First the blood. A slaughterhouse worth of blood, as if somebody had dyed a couple of gallon jugs of full-fat milk deep crimson and slung them all over the walls and floor. One bright arterial arc splashed the ceiling and part of the far wall.

There were two big windows in the front wall, the unmirrored one, and through them failing light filtered through the rosebushes. Downstage, about six feet forward of the window, at the end of a pair of drag scars, was a massive glass-topped table, puddled and smeared with blood. The body of a man with a more-than-superficial resemblance to Chaz sprawled beside it. A rag that might have been Chaz's shirt lay on the floor across the room from the body, as if someone had hurled it there.

The decedent--and Brady should have checked for a pulse before deciding that, but considering the massive, slashing overkill of the chest wounds, it was nothing more than a formality--had tumbled onto his back, one leg folded under him, eyes staring under a drying red film. He'd fallen half-

across an undone leather strap or belt. A short length of heavy chain lay puddled beside him, one end fixed to a home-made manacle and the other padlocked to a staple bolted to the pad under the torn-up tile. The flies had found the body.

There were bloody handprints on the walls and the frame of the archway beside Brady, and in places alongside the bloody footprints and drag marks on the floor. As if somebody had gone on hands and knees for a little, before he could make himself get up again.

"Christ," said one of the cops. "Did he use a paint roller?"

Brady said, "Clear," because it was what you said, and turned on his flashlight, needing the beam more than he needed his night vision. Simultaneously, through his earpiece and just plain with his ears, he heard Todd and Lau say "Clear." He raised his eyes from the body on the floor, from the blood, and saw Todd frowning at him across the devastated dining room, his firearm at high ready and shaking in his hand.

It didn't matter. You were supposed to shake when you pulled the trigger. Pulled it, and kept pulling it, because once you started you didn't stop. That's what the two-handed tension grip was for, because the guys who designed it knew you were going to be shaking--

A half-dozen beams spotlit the room now, sweeping across every terrible detail. Brady was hyperventilating. He was back in Texas inside his head as well, the gun in his hand hot with firing, the blood--everywhere. And he thought, and could not believe he was thinking, *It could have been worse, what happened to me.*

Nikki Lau, eyes wide, turned and hurried with stiff dignity from the room. Brady might have been right behind her, but Falkner hollered from the front yard, in the carrying voice of command, "Brady, can I bring up the damned paramedics? NOW?"

Why didn't she just use the com? "Todd, back of the house," he said, and--damn seniority--Todd and the SWAT officers headed down the long corridor, banging doors open as they went. "Clear!" Todd yelled from the bottom of the hall.

Brady turned around and walked past the shuddering police, stepped onto the stoop, and paused. Falkner looked up at him; her hands were full of Chaz, and Worth was crouched beside them both.

"It's clear," Brady said. His voice was as steady as that wrought-iron-and-glass dining room table. "He took care of it. All."

*

Falkner had never seen Brady look like that. The catalog of Chaz's damage, his responses to Worth's manipulations, the blood--what was *in* there? No, not now. She kept her hand over Chaz's ear--she knew what her field-command voice was--and shouted, "We're clear! Medics, right *now*!"

Three of them pelted through the weeds, laden with gear. Falkner sat back and bore Chaz's weight, such as it was, and let Worth brief them. She spoke the language.

Inside Falkner's arms, Chaz was cold and quaking, rolling waves of shivering that would do nothing but wear him out. *Hurry it up. Hurry.*

"Possible c-spine injury, bilateral deep lacerations on his back," Worth recited, sounding as if she, too, were cold and shaking. "No arterial bleeding."

Worth was crying. Falkner had never seen her do it before. She doubted Worth had had a chance to notice she was doing it.

"No head trauma?" one of the paramedics asked dubiously.

"The blood's not all his. Rapid weak pulse, shocky, low BP, dehydration, treat his right wrist as broken, Jesus, why are you just *standing* there, this is a *federal officer*!"

Which was unfair. Two of them were getting a backboard and cervical collar ready while the third observed what he could around Worth's hands, Falkner's coat.

"It's okay, ma'am," said the second paramedic. "We've got him now." She had the cervical collar.

Worth's eyes got big at the sight of it. "Chaz, listen. You there?"

"Yes."

"The paramedics are here. They have to put a cervical collar on you. It's okay."

It was not okay. Falkner could tell from the way he breathed, short and jerky through his nose. "Worth, handle the coat."

Worth was almost hyperventilating herself, but she nodded. As the paramedic's hands replaced hers at his neck, she reached for the coat to ease it off his shoulders.

"Squeeze my hand," Falkner ordered Chaz, and found his left one with her right. "Harder. Harder than that. Come on."

The distraction was enough to get him through the application of the collar. Nothing was going to be distracting enough for the backboard.

When the paramedics got Chaz in place on it and his weight came down on the wounds on his back, a broken, scraping noise like an abused violin got out of his mouth. When they tried to tighten down the straps over his chest and arms and over his thighs--

"No." His voice grated like cinder blocks sliding. He arched his body, twisted, while three paramedics called him *Sir* in loud voices and one said, aside in doubtful understatement: "He's combative. This isn't great."

"Chaz, hold still. You have to hold still," Worth begged.

He couldn't do it. He was going to fight them, and hurt himself. Falkner put out a hand to stop the paramedics. "Chaz," she said, in the bring-the-hammer-down voice. "Look at me, Chaz."

He was panting through his nose, sweating with panic, but he looked at her. Whether his eyes were focusing was anybody's guess.

"You have to let them stabilize you for transport. You have to do this. I'll be with you the whole time; I won't let anything happen to you."

He squeezed his eyes closed and let out a shuddering breath. But he subsided, lay rigid and shaking while the paramedics snugged up the restraints. Falkner looked around for her coat and found Worth strangling it with both hands, looking at nothing. Falkner eased the cloth out of her grip and laid it over Chaz. She thought his mouth relaxed a little.

They lifted him and headed for the ambulance. Falkner saw someone with Lau's profile and the swing of her hair off to her right. Yes, Lau. Falkner caught her eye. Lau jogged over.

"Call Hafidha," Falkner said. "Tell her we're okay."

"*Are* we okay?" Lau said, with a lowered voice and a dubious expression.

"Yes." Falkner caught an acid whiff of vomit on Lau's breath. Good *God*, what was in that house?

Chaz and the paramedics had gone ahead, with Worth attached like a sidecar, keeping pace. "So far," Falkner added, and followed after.

*

Lau waited until Falkner started after Chaz and the paramedics. She knew her hands were going to shake on the phone keys. She also knew Falkner wouldn't think less of her for it. But Nikki Lau was bulletproof. Those were the rules.

She thought Brady had seen her bail on the house. He wouldn't think less of her, either. And she hadn't compromised the scene. One of the Stateys had only gotten as far as the back porch before he hurled, and seeing that, she'd felt relatively professional, puking briskly into the weeds and getting back to work.

She hoped one of the team had a breath mint on them.

She pressed one on the speed dial. There was barely time for a ring.

"Talk," said Hafidha's voice.

"We've got him, Hafs." She felt the prickling in her nose and throat and eyes that said she was going to cry after all.

"Oh, Jesus." A pause; she heard Hafidha breathing hard. "Okay. Okay. Is he all right?"

For an instant, Lau resented Falkner and the delegating process. How to answer that? "Yes. Maybe."

"*What*?"

"Hafs, I don't know. He's been starved. He's hurt, I think. He's-- I don't know. The paramedics are here." Good grief, she knew better than this. She knew how to make a statement. You didn't say things like that, you just *didn't*.

Even with the memory of Chaz's blood-splashed skull-face before you.

She could hear Hafidha's uneven breathing. At last she said, "Did you kill the son of a bitch?"

"Hafs--"

"*Tell* me you didn't let him get away, and he's dead. Because if you--"

"Chaz-- Chaz took care of it." In a blood-sprayed room buzzing with flies and stinking of terror and meat already begun to turn. Her stomach humped rebelliously, and she swallowed. "He took care of it."

Hafidha's breath caught. "That's my baby brother," she said, her voice cracking.

Act V

When Falkner looked up, it had gotten dark. When had that happened? The yard was crisscrossed and pooled with cruiser headlights, spotlights, battery work lights, all haloed by the smoke in the air. The building looked like a crime scene, now, not a house. Ahead of her the open back of the ambulance was like a lit window in the wall of dark blue sky and silhouetted pines.

She caught up with the paramedics as they lowered Chaz onto the gurney. His left hand turned, fingers stretched, to brush Worth's, and Worth leaned over him.

"Refeeding," Chaz rasped.

Worth's expression went sharp with alarm. "Platypus, how many calories?"

"One thousand...five hundred fifty."

"The whole *week?*"

His lips moved, shaped "Yeah."

"Activity?"

Something happened in his face, something Falkner couldn't read. It frightened her.

He squeezed his eyes tight. "Slamming."

Worth's mouth opened, a perfect O. "Oh, my God--" She turned to Falkner. "At the hospital. You've got to make them understand he could be starving. Rwanda, Bangladesh starving. Nobody knows how this works in betas. He's been without food the equivalent of, of a month or so, and I don't know--he was slamming neurons, so likely more. They could kill him by feeding him. He's at risk for cardiac arrest, just from the workload of digestion on his heart. You've got to find someone who's up to date on protocols for treating starvation."

So far, Falkner had told Lau. That was still true, wasn't it? "It's all right." She laid both hands on Worth's vibrating shoulders. "I've got Johns Hopkins on speed dial. By the time we get to the hospital, they'll have everything ready to prep him for evac."

Worth's throat worked; she nodded and managed a bent smile. "You would, wouldn't you?"

Yes, I would. I do. "Good job," she said, and felt Worth's shoulders drop.

A new set of red lights had joined the law enforcement vehicles in the yard. Firefighters. Mike Pelletier came around the ambulance, uniformed and bare-headed. He asked the question with his face.

"We've got him," Falkner said.

He nodded. "Your perp?"

"Dead."

"All right, then." He surveyed the house, narrow-eyed and professional. "Damn, wish I had a camera. There's a textbook case of how not to maintain a fire break around a dwelling. It's gonna be hell to save that."

A deep, harsh inhalation made Falkner turn to the gurney. But Chaz was just drawing breath to speak. "Let it burn."

Pelletier looked from Chaz to her.

"Let it burn," Chaz repeated, softer. Then, barely moving air-- "She's not here."

"She?" But his fingers uncurled, a flicked-away gesture, so Falkner knew it didn't matter if she understood. "It's his house," she told Pelletier. "Just buy us time to process the scene."

She lifted her left wrist, and noticed the blood smeared down the sleeve of her shirt. The other sleeve was worse. That gave her a chance to remember that the team would have their earpieces out; too much chatter on the line now that the crisis was over. One of the crises.

The paramedics were folding the gurney into the ambulance. "Stay with him," she said to Worth. "I'll be right back. If he threatens to make a fuss, tell him I'll slug him."

Worth managed to grin. Good girl. She'd do it, too. Falkner set off to find Lau.

Thirty feet from the ambulance, she met Reyes. The headlights from two cop cars intersected just beyond him, putting him at the apex of a triangle of shadow, standing straight as the pines across the road. He met her eyes, didn't look down. No, of course he didn't. What was done was done. You made the best choice you could, acted on it, and went forward from there; the past was a road that disappeared behind your heels. That was Reyes.

It wasn't easy to be Stephen Reyes. Falkner didn't think tonight would make it easier. She should nod and walk past, if she couldn't do any better. Instead she patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. I bet you've been wrong before."

He turned away, his face like hammered steel.

Tomorrow, Falkner thought. *I'll forgive you then.* She pushed on across the yard.

Lau snapped her phone closed as Falkner came up. "Tell the others I'm going in with him, to flash the badge in the ER."

"Copy. Any instructions?"

Falkner gazed across the yard to the house, the vehicles, the highly-organized commotion around them. Brady and Reyes would make the scene talk to them. Worth would get William Villette's body ready for the coroner

and eventual release to Frost, and collect whatever information it could tell them at the scene. Todd would make sure they got out ahead of the fire, team and gear intact. Lau would figure out a way to turn the facts into a story that made sense to people who didn't want to know how little sense the world made, sometimes.

She could leave those things to the team; they were good at them. She'd do the thing she was good at.

"No," she said. "Carry on."

She headed back toward the ambulance.

Worth had triumphed, apparently. Chaz was grayish under the blood and his eyes were squeezed tight, but he was hooked up to the monitors, and her coat had been replaced with a blanket. "I've got him," Falkner said. Worth slid out of the ambulance and Falkner took her place. After a last look, Worth loped off toward the house.

One of the paramedics finished looping a cannula under Chaz's nose and said, "Sir? I'm going to start a line for fluids and pain meds. You're going to feel a needle stick on the back of your left hand." He set the line and pushed the blanket away from Chaz's arm, and froze, and jerked his head up to meet Falkner's eyes.

It was like watching Chaz cross the yard with the knife. She stared at the needle tracks inside his arm and thought, *He wouldn't do that*, and knew if she was sure, she wouldn't have had the thought.

Chaz's lips parted, sticky-dry. The oxygen and glucose were like a switch thrown; a return to coherence as rapid and remarkable as a diabetic's. "He injected me with his blood," he said, slow and clear.

No. She would react when she had time. "He raped at least fourteen women." *God damn it, get your breath. Don't make him wait for this.* "They all tested negative."

"Fifteen." Eyes shut, tendons straining on his chest below the collar.

"Your mother."

You can't nod in a cervical collar. That's the point. But he did something with the corner of his mouth. "You figured it out."

"Chaz--" she said. And stopped herself before she could say *it doesn't matter.* Because of course it mattered. She swallowed pity and anger and sorrow, past the constriction in her throat, and they felt like gravel on the way down. "She must have been incredibly brave."

His face smoothed, and he breathed through his nose, one, two, three. "Yeah. He--" another gulp of air. "He didn't get her back."

Oh, sweetheart. But that wasn't something you said to one of your agents.

"Prophylaxis?" he got out, careful precision. Chaz *would* use the right word.

"Damned straight, prophylaxis." She nodded at the paramedic. Report it on the way in.

They were on agonizing conversational ground already; she might as well get it over with. "Chaz," she said, and was proud of how steady, how neutral her voice was, "do we need to run a rape kit?"

His eyes popped open. Then the thing he did with his mouth was a smile, sort of. "Huh," he muttered. "Forgot to put it on the list."

"What?"

"No," he said. She could tell he was articulating carefully. "No rape."

There were no fates worse than death. But on the chance that death wasn't on the table after all, it was nice to be able to rule out a few other things as well.

The doors closed them in, and a moment later the ambulance rocked over the yard, down the gravel drive. Chaz didn't wince; he was too tense to tense up any more. How long before the pain meds took effect? One of the paramedics was on the radio to the hospital. She listened with one ear, in case she needed to correct anything.

"Everyone okay?" Chaz whispered. This time she was sure his eyes were focusing.

"All good."

"Reyes..."

What did he want to say? "Reyes was there."

Chaz blinked. "He's right, you know." He closed his eyes. Falkner listened to the air hiss and catch in his dry throat.

He couldn't know Reyes expected the worst. Or what his worst was. She wouldn't believe it.

Drying blood glued hanks of hair to his forehead. Some were in his eyes. She itched to brush them back. If it were Rebekah on the gurney, she'd do it, but Rebekah was her daughter, and a child.

She didn't know what had happened to him in that house. But she could see he was holding himself together with strapping tape and barbed wire, that the holding-together hurt more than the wounds, but that he was doing it out of need. The cruelest thing she could do was touch him wrong by mistake, and make him come apart under her eyes.

In the bright working lights of the ambulance she couldn't help but read the catalog of his damage. The cervical collar hid the ligature marks, but the slashes on his back, the emaciation, the scabbed and oozing wrists, the needle marks, the bruises that bloomed everywhere--they'd seen corpses in better shape.

The glucose seemed to have stopped helping, or maybe it just couldn't keep up. She had to watch the paramedics to be sure he hadn't died yet. Chaz's eyes were half-closed and glassy, and his chest rose and fell and stopped, then rose again in a frightening non-rhythm. Each time she thought, *That's the last. He's going to arrest*. Then he'd take another painful drag of air, and she'd start the cycle of alarm over. *Be tough, Chaz. Gammas are tough. You should be tough, too.*

Please be tough, Chaz.

His last words might have been, "He's right, you know." If so, she didn't think she could say so to Reyes.

She thought of unfledged birds that fell from nests--half-naked, veins and organs visible through their tissue skin--how they gasped and struggled but couldn't make it, and there was nothing you could do to change the outcome.

At least when it happened, she'd be there. He ought to know someone was there. It wasn't as if he had anyone else.

Don't cry. If he opens his eyes and sees you, it'll scare him.

She was holding his hand, below the IV needle. When had she decided to do that?

"Sir, can you hear me?" one of the paramedics said. "We'll be at the hospital in twenty minutes. Sir?"

His fingers were cold and still in hers. "Chaz. I want you to talk. I don't care what you say, but I need to know you're conscious. Swear at me, if you can't think of anything else." *What happens in the ambulance, stays in the ambulance*.

Nothing. The paramedics exchanged a glance, checked monitors. Falkner bit the inside of her mouth to keep from giving an order, yelling, pleading, whatever it was she could feel herself about to do.

Chaz's lips moved. Falkner leaned over him and heard air leave his lungs, shaped by his tongue and mouth.

I am a poor wayfaring stranger
Traveling through this world of woe

Song lyrics. He was reciting.

But there's no sickness, toil, or danger
In that bright land to which I go.

She leaned forward, gripping his hand in both of hers. She waited for each breath, each word. Each word was another second of fight.

I know dark clouds will gather 'round me
I know my way is rough and steep...

Good boy. Keep fighting. His hand was cold, sticky with blood, fragile as a fistful of dry twigs.

But beauteous fields lie just before me...

His face twisted, as with terrible pain. He dragged in a breath, and this time the words were a hoarse rattle, made stronger with terror. "...don't remember. I can't *remember*--"

Falkner wanted to scream for someone to do something. To come and save him. But this was all they had: three good paramedics and an ambulance

going as fast as it could.

There was a chorus; what was it? Think. It was the only thing she could give him. "I'm going there to... to meet my mother," she whispered.

His face went slack. Her heart leaped with fear. Then his lips moved.

She said she'd meet me when I come...

After that, she tried to whisper it with him. She wanted to know it, in case he needed a hand over the steep parts again.

*

The air smelled like water.

They slid Chaz out of the ambulance--"Just a little bump, sir!"--under a corrugated roof he'd never seen. Beyond the roof, the asphalt parking lot was dull and dry in the overhead lights. No patter of falling drops, no swish of wet in the sound of passing cars. *Virga*, he remembered. The rain that falls but never hits the ground. In the desert you could watch it pass from a dozen miles away, grey ghost veils sweeping from a racing cloud, watering nothing, leaving nothing but the smell.

The gurney trembled under him, over pavement. Somewhere past his head, automatic doors hissed open, and cool air and hard bright light reached out to touch him. *Emergency Department*, he thought. *Emergence. I emerged.*

The last thing he saw through closing doors was Falkner.

The coat she'd wrapped him in drooped from one hand. The other arm, elbow-locked, propped her against the rear of the ambulance. Her head sank until her cheek and forehead pressed against her bloodstained sleeve. He saw her close her eyes.

She'd let go. They were safe, then. He closed his eyes, too, and let himself fall.

The Scene

Tyler County, TX, May 31, 2008

Outside there's bustle, voices, the Japanese monster-movie hiss of water through fire hoses as the firefighters borrow time for the techs to process the scene. But they're finished in here. The living and the dead have been removed, and now forensics is photographing the floodlit yard. All that bustle is outside in another world, not the world where Chaz spent the last seven days chained to a staple in the floor.

So Stephen Reyes walks alone through a house that might as well be silent, every light glaring.

It's a violation of scene protocol to touch the switches, even with gloved hands, but nobody's going to file an action for excessive force against Chaz. It doesn't matter. The perp is dead. The victim lived.

This will never see the inside of a courtroom, except the one in Reyes' head. And it's not Chaz on trial. Anymore.

On his third pass through the house, Reyes shuts off the lights. One by one, starting from the entryway. Enough illumination filters in from outside to get by on and he knows where the blood is. He darkens the great room, the dining room, the hallway. He passes into the kitchen, and brings the light down there as well.

And then he stands in the darkness, hands cupped to his ears, and listens. Not to the voices in the yard, the engines, and the encroaching flames. But to the wind in the leaves, the whirr of insects, the beat of his own heart. He breathes deep, and smells smoke, roses, stale metallic water, stale metallic blood. Sweat, starvation. Sugar. No, *honey.* Cinnamon.

And what was it like, to lie here in the darkness on the cement pad and listen to the beat of your heart, the hiss of your breath through your nostrils, the rattle of your chains? What was it like to stand in this kitchen, to hear the chained man breathing in the next room, and think on how to wear him down?

He thinks, *Get the hospital to check all gift deliveries with me. No candy, no flowers. Especially no roses.*

Reyes reaches out blindly and finds the light. His hand falls to his side. Slowly, he turns in the kitchen. It's clean, worn, scrubbed. There's no blood here. Food wrappers in the trash: an apple core, an empty jar of peanut butter--the plastic sides swiped clean by fingers rather than a butter knife--and foil from a brand of granola bars he knows Chaz liked. Another granola bar on the counter, lying on the opened wrapper, broken into fragments. One knife from the knife rack is missing.

The clean empty bucket, and the one half-full of water. Reyes kneels beside it, bends down, sniffs. Stale, but drinkable. If he weren't wearing gloves, if he trusted the water, he'd dip his hands and taste.

He rises and turns and walks away, through the dining room, great room, entryway, leaving each light blazing in turn, as he found them. He means to leave the door unlocked and open behind him as he walks away, but it's hung crooked. He jumps when it slams of its own accord.

Lau moves toward him, brisk steps, chin high, hair swinging. He stops and waits, head turned in expectation but his body angled away. *Mixed messages, Stephen?*

She swallows. Her eyes glisten. He waits.

"Chaz made it to the hospital," she says. "Falkner just called. They're flying him to Johns Hopkins. She says--" A snagged breath, but she gets control, and eases the next words past. "She says his odds aren't bad."

Vigil

Part 1

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

In times of black despair, banality can prove a useful refuge. And, Reyes was forced to admit, there was very little in the world more banal than a slim brightly-colored paperback about the adventures of a murder-solving cat and his hapless human partner. He read it casually, skimming as he flicked pages, his back to the window so the sunlight warmed his scalp and the nape of his neck.

The book wasn't worthy of a lot of attention, and he wasn't *paying* it a lot of attention. He suspected he might have read this one before, and wondered if he would remember before the end. They tended to blur together. Maybe he'd remember when he got to the murder.

If he ever got to the murder. He was on page 150, and nobody was dead yet, though there had been a great deal of shopping in bookstores and a certain amount of architecture and quirky local history of made-up places.

But he wouldn't have wanted anything more gripping. This was just enough to keep his eyes moving while leaving everything else free to process and observe. He did some of his best thinking in a state of mild preoccupation--driving, folding laundry, on his morning run when he was trying to tune out the complaints of his ankles and knees. It was like the prayers that focused a knight upon his vigil; something to occupy the conscious mind while the subconscious did the deep work at hand.

There was a Dennis Lehane in his bag, which he could have read if he needed something that required thought, but most of his brain wanted the space to pay attention to other things.

Things like the steady hum of the machines surrounding the patient, connected by needles and tape and tubes and clips and wires and elastic straps and sticky patches. Things like the slow rise and fall of Chaz Villette's chest under the white bedspread, the visible motion of eyes tracking rapidly under closed lids. Reyes could see the heart monitor from where he sat, hear the rattle of Chaz's breath. They'd taken him off the cannula and the rails on the bed were down, over hospital staff's protests.

The nurse had wanted to raise them, for Chaz's own protection. She'd argued for a posey, too, after the episode where Chaz had yanked out his IV and made it halfway to the door before collapsing. Reyes was pretty sure Chaz would never remember having done that.

Reyes had pulled the nurse out into the hall and explained why tying this particular patient to the bed was a bad idea, no matter how disoriented he seemed. Eventually, he'd just called up the attending physician and made sure it was on the chart. Rails down. No posey. If the patient wants to walk somewhere and he's physically capable of it, let him. Help him. IV needles in the elbow, if at all possible, not in the hands.

"Leave him an escape route," he'd said to the doctor, hoping she'd understand. Not that Chaz was weak, or crazy, or combative. But that after all he'd been through, he'd feel better--and rest better, and heal better--for every little bit of security and self-determination that they could give him.

She'd made faces Reyes recognized. Faces of professional doubt and disagreement, and *I'll take it under advisement, but you're crazy as well as ignorant and wrong.*

So Reyes had swallowed and said, "We'll get somebody to sit with him."

"That's irregular. And you can't be here 24/7--"

"Why not?" Challenging, running down the team roster in his head. Seven people. Enough to take it in shifts. There might be some others Reyes could shanghai into it, other favors he could call in. Pauley. A couple more down the hall. Madeline Frost worked on the campus. So did Amrita Srinivasan, who was an old friend.

The physician's headshake became a frown. "You mean that."

"Just until he's competent again."

A long stare, until she relented, hands fisted in the pockets of her labcoat. "All right," she'd said. "Don't make me regret this."

There was nothing Reyes could do about the cast on Chaz's right wrist. He just had to hope that being able to move the hand freely would be enough. On top of everything else, there was the food. Apples in the fruit cup, no. Oatmeal cookies, no. It might be nothing. He might be fine with it. And

Reyes knew that nobody could expect to get through life in 21st century America without running across an apple unexpectedly. But you could never tell where triggers might be.

It would be better for Chaz if he could decide for himself when he was going to confront them, and find out just how bad it was going to be. Better for him to have that self-determination, too. It would have to come slowly; Reyes was certain that William Villette had worked hard to strip all choice and autonomy from his captive, and they would be terrifying at first to reclaim.

But Chaz was strong. He would find ways around those fences, circumvent those boundaries. If he couldn't go over, he would go under. Or through. Reyes smiled, half to himself, skimming three pages about a selection of used books and shipping crates. He hoped he was wrong, that there *was* something different about the betas. That they were not gammas in waiting, but that however they came by their abilities, they were... carriers, immune.

The hypothesis was a seductive enough comfort that he knew he should reject it until the evidence supported it more thoroughly.

That didn't take away the question of how, after days in which William Villette had been so very careful to keep control, Chaz had lured Villette close enough to turn the tables.

No. Now was not the time to think about that. Except Reyes should face it; he had to face it, so that nobody else would need to. It was his job, anticipating the worst, and he did it so the team could be happy they had Chaz back, that he was improving, that he was going to live. *There are no fates worse than death*. And while there had been earlier victims, too many damned earlier victims, when they got to Villette in the end nobody had died.

Nobody who mattered, Reyes thought, and wondered if it was decency or cowardice that he felt ashamed of the savagery with which he thought it. Hating people--even gammas, even serial killers--didn't help get the job done.

Sure. It didn't change a thing. Somewhere down in the pit of his belly, Reyes would have liked to bring William Villette back from the dead, so he could kill him himself, a few more times.

Chaz's breathing quickened. His heart rate increased. Was he only waking?

No. It was a dream. Reyes could see him straining against the REM atonia, the tiny twitches in muscles that wanted to move but could not. Reyes could get up from the chair, cross the room, take Chaz's hand and awaken him from the nightmare--and it was obviously a nightmare now, as Chaz moaned low and rough. Reyes's palms itched with the desire to do so.

Chaz should also be allowed to decide when and where he was touched. Reyes stayed where he sat. He folded the book in his hand open, disrespectful of the spine. "Villette," he said, because he was certain that William might have called Chaz many things, but that would not be one of them. "Villette. You're dreaming."

No response. Shallow breaths now, quick and fast. "Villette. It's Reyes. You're only dreaming."

Maybe the nightmare had run its course, and maybe Reyes' voice had interrupted it. Either way, it was over, and Chaz breathed more easily, sliding deeper into drugged slumber. It would do for now.

Reyes turned the last page of the book and frowned. He wasn't, he realized, quite certain who had been murdered or who had done the murdering, or what their motive was, or how the mystery had been solved. Or if he had read this one before.

It didn't matter. He'd probably read the same one again some day, in some airport somewhere, and he still wouldn't be able to remember how it had ended then.

Todd appeared in the door with a cup of coffee and a notebook computer, by which Reyes knew that he was working on his on-again, off-again novel this month. Reyes nodded to him silently--they didn't really need to talk that often, after all these years--then collected his bag. He left the broken-spined book on Chaz's nightstand, in case Chaz wanted a stupid distraction later.

And so Chaz would see that he had been there without having to ask, when Chaz woke up and wanted to know.

Part 2

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

It was just a visit to a friend in the hospital.

Chaz was no stranger to an ER. This was just another chance taken too far. He was always sulky after those, because he hated to be reminded that the hero in his head and heart was still a little bigger than he was. But Daphne knew how to pet and praise and tease him out of a sulk now. She was proud of it. She was a good friend.

When she stood in the door of his room, the whole idiot vision she'd constructed of the next thirty minutes turned to vapor. The dark, the slanting glare of police spotlights, the smoke-thick air, had made it seem like something she'd read and envisioned, a movie she'd watched. Even in her nightmares it wasn't real.

She should have known better. She'd had the blood on her hands.

The dun-colored skull on the white pillow had Chaz's face, more or less, and his hair, its wildness suppressed by dirt. Dirty hair wasn't a priority. Not now. His eyes were closed and sunken. Under one a long scratch marked the jutting bone. Even that didn't seem to have color in it. The NG tube snaked across his cheek and into one nostril. The white tape that secured it was shockingly bright, like a fresh gouge in old wood.

He might have been cut out of an old browned photograph and stuck down on white paper. An image of someone who'd lived once, trapped forever motionless.

The bruises on his neck were purple and yellow. So were the ones on his arms, and the needle marks inside his elbow. Clean white gauze hid where iron had planed away the skin of his left wrist. His right wrist and hand were cased in plaster.

He was unaware of his body talking to machines: heart monitor, blood pressure, pulse ox. The machines pumped nutrition down the NG tube, saline and morphine into a vein in the back of his hand. Veins raised and ropey like an old man's.

A clean, white room that hissed and clicked and thumped softly. A room with its own breath, its own heartbeat. His were lost in there somewhere. She stared and searched for them, listened hard. But only the room had signs of life.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't going to die. They'd won. *He'd* won.

But they'd still lost him.

Her legs shook under her. *Stand up on it,* he'd say to her, and she had, but now she couldn't stand up on the damned linoleum, and there were no chairs... She swung back out of the doorway and put her shoulder blades to the wall, gasping, closing her eyes. She clutched her arms across her chest, but it didn't keep her from shaking, from weakness, from panic and black despair.

Coffee. She'd get herself a coffee, and drink it in the cafeteria, and buy herself another twenty minutes in which the world was still the world she'd lived in up until now and Chaz Villette was still her spunky irritable kid brother. And then she'd go in there and deal with this new world, whatever it turned out to be.

Chaz was sleeping. He'd never know.

She could have twenty minutes.

Part 3

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

"You're real this time." Chaz's consonants were blurry with drowsiness and a dry tongue. But his eyes were open--half-open--and focusing.

Esther Falkner leaned forward on the stiff square-cushioned hospital room chair. "I was real the last time, too. You just didn't believe it."

Chaz breathed out through his nose, a little louder than normal. Falkner thought it was a laugh.

She stood and took the two steps to the bedside so he wouldn't have to turn his head. "Do you remember me telling you about the surgery?"

He closed his eyes again for a moment, as if he needed the energy allotted to vision for other work. "Sort of. It got-- You were...part of an episode of *Mythbusters*."

Falkner smiled, and realized it had been several days since she had. "Maybe I *wasn't* real."

"Tell me again?"

She wanted to soften it. She wanted, in fact, to lie, to tell him he'd be all better soon and had nothing to fear. But he wouldn't believe her. And he should know in advance how steep the hill was. "There was enough intact muscle tissue in your back that you still have some strength and range of motion. It's too soon to tell how much you'll have once the damage heals." That much lie she could tell, and he'd accept: to talk about "damage," as if there'd been an accident. As if this could have happened to anyone.

He didn't lower his eyelids or look away. But the tendons in his jaw and neck flexed, and there was no hiding the motion. It took more flesh than he had now to furnish an impassive public face.

His eyes were sunk in their bruised-looking orbits, as if pulled down by an imbalance of pressure caused by the wasting of his body. She could barely see the colors of his mismatched irises. She concentrated on trying to. "The damage to your heart is slight, and reversible. But it's wear and tear, so it may shorten your life. The HIV test was negative, but it's too early for that

to be conclusive. The broken bone in your wrist should mend clean, though. And you'll gain the weight back, if you can avoid thinking hard."

His head creased the pillow deeper for an instant, and his chest rose sharply with a breath she didn't hear him draw. He blinked. "Sounds like wait and see."

"You'll get better."

"But I might not...get *well*."

"Your definition of 'well' might change."

His long mouth twisted. "Everything. Everything's changed." He closed his eyes tight. His lips barely moved, as if he fought to keep the words behind them. "It's not fair."

A child's protest; and no more than the truth. She'd thought so since she'd had time to think, after they'd got him out. "No. It isn't."

If he needed to show weakness, this was as good a moment as any. She touched his left hand. His cool, dry fingers curled around hers; it made her throat hurt. Twelve seconds, the silence lasted.

But when he broke it, his voice was steady, and his eyes were no brighter than normal. "There's always a trade-off. We're tough."

She wasn't sure who he meant by "we." She squeezed his fingers, not too hard, and said, "Yes. We are."

Part 4

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

When he opened his eyes, there was Daphne.

She sat on the left side of the bed. Because she didn't knit, she was reading. Or staring at a magazine, because reading was the wrong word. One, it was a copy of *Redbook*. Two, her eyes weren't tracking. He rested for a little, exhausted with the effort of waking up, warmed by the lines of her frown. Gray-eyed Athena. Quietly sitting. He remembered her hands cradling his head, her unconcern for the blood and filth that had covered him.

Her and Falkner. If he knew them, they were taking vigil in shifts.

He wondered if he was strong enough to say thank you.

"Hey," he said. And when his voice worked, and she looked up, he added, "You saved my life."

He wasn't sure it was praise. Just a statement. She set the magazine aside, her fingers arching in discomfort, and reached out right-handed to take his left.

"You saved your life," she said. "You self-rescued. We just drove you to the hospital. Coyote didn't even have to chew his paw off."

He didn't want to look at her hand, because if he did he also had to look at his own. Dirty nails, bones like sticks. No. He'd thought of chewing it off, but hadn't had the means to do it.

Turning his head was hard, but he managed, feeling the prickle of tape and the tug of the NG tube. When had they--right, he'd been awake when they put it in. He'd helped, swallowing water (in a paper cup, and he'd never before realized that that was a luxury) to help it down. That whirr by the right side of the bed must be the feeding machine. Ache of needles in his veins, pull of sutures across his back, all of it blurred behind painkillers.

He'd thought, maybe when he woke up, he'd know what kind of monster he'd turned into. But he still felt like him. Tired him. Injured him. Ridiculously grateful to wake up and see Daphne's bangs fallen across her cheek him.

I bet you could still burn out if you wanted.

Well, maybe not when he was on a feed. But probably between them. But he didn't want.

Was that him wanting to live? Or was that It? How did you know?

She reached for something on the table beside the bed. A long white wrapper that blurred in the light when she raised it. "Lemon swab?" she said brightly, like the Tick offering Arthur a moist towelette. "Wouldn't your day be more complete with a lemon swab?"

Oh god, don't make me laugh. He tried to shake his head and it didn't work. He needed to tell her something and he didn't have the strength to make it gentle. He said, "I found her."

Profiler voodoo. She glanced at his mouth, when he spoke, his eyes, his hands. She said, "Your mom."

Talking, okay, he could manage. Nodding not so much. Which meant he had to say, "Yeah" out loud. He wanted to say more, tell her about the dark strength that had carried him out of that house, show her the mirror. Daphne. If he could show anybody, he could show Daphne. Her or Hafs.

If he raised it now it might kill him, NG tube or no. Would that be so bad? Bad for Daphne. And if he thought that, he wasn't the monster yet, was he? Or would it use his feelings for her to keep him alive? More damage later against a little damage now?

Gammas were crafty.

He said, "I told you she died when she was my age."

Daphne nodded. "I remember."

"It was a small apartment. Smaller than mine now. She used to go in the bathroom to shoot up because she didn't want me to see."

"You knew that."

Maybe he was stronger than he thought, because he turned his head and looked at her. She looked down. Silly question--no. Not a silly question. A caring question. But one he couldn't stand to answer.

Harshly, voice scratching so he had to start the sentence twice, he said, "She died on the toilet. Like Elvis. It's what addicts do." And Daphne didn't

answer, just held his hand in her own more tightly.

Didn't ask for more. Which made it possible to give it to her. "I didn't call in time."

"Call."

"911." He must still be in post-traumatic shock, because the words came out so easily, so calmly, as if somebody else--a case worker, a cop--were reciting them. "I heard her fall, you see. Things breaking. Glass."

Because it was Daphne, he didn't need to tell her that heroin depresses the central nervous system. That even in recreational doses, it causes bradycardia and hypotension, slowing the heart, depressing respiration, lowering blood pressure. Because it was Daphne, she knew. He wondered how many ODs she worked, how many of them died in exactly the circumstances he was describing.

He said, "I tried to open the door."

"Locked?"

"Blocked. Something soft." Her pupils dilated; her respiration quickened. The palm lying over the back of his hand grew damp, and he turned his hand over to squeeze her fingers. As if *he* were comforting *her*. He felt it, vividly as if it were now, how the body blocking the door rocked when he pushed against it, the resilience and resistance of flesh.

Mom?

It's okay, cowboy. Mommy just fell. I broke a glass.

He saw red through the crack between the door and the frame. Are you bleeding?

It's just a little cut. I just cut myself a little.

Mom? His voice broke. Should I get somebody? Mrs. K? Should I call an ambulance?

No! And then softer, as if she was sorry she had yelled. It's just a little cut. I'll get up in a minute. I just need a rest.

Mom?

Don't call, she said. I don't need any help, sweetie. I'll just take care of this in a minute.

He knew she was still alive when he finally disobeyed her, because he could hear the slow, slow rasp of her breath, but she'd stopped answering his voice. By the time the paramedics arrived, she hadn't been breathing anymore.

He brought himself back with an effort. Daphne's fingers still stroked his hand, the one without the cast on it. Absently, as if fingers and hand were disconnected from the both of them. He said, "I didn't call 911 soon enough to save her. And the ambulance took fourteen minutes to respond."

"Fourteen minutes? In a metro area?" She was professionally offended on behalf of the child he had been. He adored her for it.

He shrugged. "Barrio," he said. Funny how the people who lived in the ghetto, in English or Spanish, called it the neighborhood. "Nobody's going to sue."

Daphne's breathing was too fast, rather than not at all. There had been a point to Chaz's story. What was it? Oh, yeah. "So you saved my life. Live with it."

He hoped that wasn't an inadvertent curse. She watched him carefully before deciding it was all right to smile. She squeezed his hand once more before she disengaged her fingers. *Don't go,* he wanted to say, but he couldn't bring himself to beg for anything.

She said, "I brought you something to brighten the room."

Not flowers, he hoped fervently, but he nodded. And when she pulled a purple stuffed coyote the size of a small child from her blue Ikea bag, he laughed.

"I also brought your laptop." His, familiar. Yes. The case encrusted in stickers--*Sterling Rope: Because It's A Long Way Down. KLIMBINGRÜVEN*--and the latch that didn't, quite. "And this isn't your phone. That's still in evidence."

He winced.

"But Hafs cloned the memory. So it might as well be your phone." She smiled.

"You stopped by my place."

Daphne knew all the questions he would ask, if he had the strength, and answered them. One by one, meticulously. "I watered the chilis," she said. "I don't think the tomatoes are going to make it. And I saw one of the Ng kids. The Angry Kitteh is still showing up to get fed. I bought them some more cat food while I was there."

"I don't deserve you," he said.

She leaned over and kissed his filthy hair. "Bullshit."

Part 5

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

He was trying to learn how to wake himself up out of the nightmares.

This time it worked; he told his dream-self, "At the end of this dark hall, there's a door. You're going to open it, there'll be a lot of light, and we'll wake up."

He opened his eyes in the diffused white light from the hospital room ceiling, the warmer light that came in the long, narrow window. But the feeling from the dream, that there was someone nearby, waiting and out of sight, didn't go away. His heart rate refused to drop. He raised his head.

Madeline Frost sat in the chair beside the bed.

His mouth and throat were dry as sand. "Hello, Madeline," came out as a croak.

She poured him a cup of water from the pitcher and said, "Hello, Charles."

He sipped the water, letting it sit for a moment on the parched surface of his tongue. "Did you just happen to be in the neighborhood?"

She tilted her head a little. "I work here."

"Right. Of course. Sorry. Not awake yet."

She nodded, and he had the uncomfortable impression that she was making a mental note: *Charles Villette, when first awake, asks stupid questions.*

"I've completed the autopsy on William Villette," she said, her voice precise, unmoved: *another body sliced open, just like any other body*. "I thought you might be interested in the results."

He barely managed to fight back his first reaction--*swallow down that gag reflex, cowboy*--and said, hoarsely, "Could you make me a copy? I mean, yes, thank you, but not right now." *Jesus, please, not right now. Not when I still feel his palms against my lips.*

She catalogued that reaction, too, her eyes as flat and intent as a cobra's. Then she said, "The folder is on the table." As if this scene wasn't surreal enough already, Chaz realized that the little table beside his bed was strewn

with brightly colored paper animals: a crane, a frog, a giraffe, two elephants, a platypus. All standing on a plain manila folder.

"I don't need it back," said Madeline Frost.

There was a long, sterile silence. He remembered thinking Frost would have questions, would want to know about his mother, about the Relative, would want to look at his DNA and find where all the faults were, the trisomies and broken chromosomes and all the rest of the mess. And since he sure as hell couldn't get away from her, he tried to brace himself, reminded himself that there was no malice in it. Frost didn't care enough about live humans (live bait) to be malicious.

But instead, out of that long silence, she said abruptly, "My father killed my mother."

"Oh," said Chaz, trying desperately to wake up, wake up and process what the hell was going on. Because that wasn't a question. "Um."

She met his eyes. "It was...very unpleasant," she said and then bent her head, staring at the piece of paper she was folding in her lap.

"Oh," Chaz said again and swallowed hard against something--a giggle? a scream?--as he realized she was trying, in her own way, to sympathize with him. After a moment, because he could see how much it had cost her to say that, he said, "Thank you, Madeline."

She made an odd gesture, something between a nod, a shrug, and the twitch of a horse trying to get rid of a fly, and there was another silence while they both watched her fingers working. She had small hands, starfish plump, but deft and precise.

Chaz took another sip of water, thought, *You know you're going to have to say it eventually*, and forced the words out: "My father raped my mother. She never..."

Anyone else would have filled that silence with an exclamation, of shock, of sympathy. Madeline simply looked at him with her hard, depthless eyes, and waited until he got the rest of the sentence out: "She never told me."

She nodded. "My mother taught me to fold paper cranes," she said and stood up. She set the origami she'd just finished on the table next to the

others, gave him an odd, brisk nod: *You're one of us now. Welcome to the club. I think you'll do.* She turned and walked out, an erect little woman, plump and graying. You'd think she was a librarian if you didn't know better.

After a moment, Chaz remembered to blink. He looked at the table. A crane, a frog, a giraffe, two elephants, a platypus. And an armadillo.

Part 6

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

The pounding of his heart wakes him. Fists pressed to his mouth, back burning, body shivering, Chaz lies in the darkness and waits to hear the rattle of chains.

But he's warm, and the room is lit softly green by a nightlight. The red glow of the assistance button burns steadily at the bedside. The bedspread is scratchy chenille, and he hates it.

Johns Hopkins. He's still in the hospital. From where he lies, curled on his side, he can see the nightstand, the ridiculous purple stuffed coyote Worth brought him, the shiny folded animals arrayed like a good start on an ark.

The folder is in the drawer, where the nurses won't see it. It felt, from the weight, as if there were color printouts of photos inside. He knows he isn't supposed to have that.

Madeline Frost broke a rule for him.

His heart, which had begun to slow, accelerates. Pain spikes; he realizes he's biting his hand. He pulls it away from his mouth before he can leave a mark that will show in the morning.

She knew he would not want to read it now. She knew he would want to keep a copy. She brought him the damned thing like a cat dragging home a butchered vole. She broke the rules to do it.

It might be the single most human action of Madeline Frost's life.

The sociopath brought me a trophy.

Part 7

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

Johns Hopkins Hospital and a private room, Chaz thought. *Jesus, the American Taxpayer could buy a couple of fighter jets for what this has got to cost.*

But there were good reasons for it. Practical reasons. He needed a certain amount of isolation if the doctors weren't to spend their time replacing the rivets he popped when some damned stupid thing flipped him out.

At least he hadn't accidentally demonstrated his new getaway trick. He had half a notion he was being medicated for anxiety as well as pain. He hated to think what would happen when that stopped.

Well, he was valuable enough to be worth fixing, he supposed, even at top-of-the-line prices. And if he couldn't be fixed...

You could mothball a fighter jet.

Knuckles on the doorframe. "Anybody home?" Hafidha called, looking in.

She'd knotted her string-thin braids into a fountain on top of her head with a red velvet-covered elastic, and the light gleamed on the brushed titanium of her glasses frames. She stepped into the room and stopped. "So how are you? You look good!"

The meds blurred the edges, but Chaz could tell an off note when he heard it. This was a whole twelve bars of off notes. His fingers clenched before he could prevent them. The bedspread balled and crimped under his left hand, and his right wrist spiked with pain. He winced. He hoped Hafidha didn't notice. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing! I'm fine." Her eyebrows arched above her glasses. "Can I come in?"

"You already did." This was bad. However the rest of the team dealt with it, Hafidha, at least, ought not to treat him as if he'd become someone else just because he'd--

Nobody knew. Did they? If they knew, and realized he'd hidden it, even Hafidha might--

"Good," she said, and shut the door to the hallway.

Chaz's heart stuttered, nervous, under his ribs. "They don't like it when you do that," he warned.

"I scoff at their don't-like. Scoff, scoff."

The tension left him so suddenly it made him shiver. She sounded like Hafidha again. Nothing very bad had happened yet.

She pulled a chair close to the bed, sat, and plopped her bag on her lap. It was a very large bag, even for Hafidha, who had a list of things she refused to be separated from nearly as long as a quartermaster's list for an invading Roman legion.

"Chaz-- Okay, Smarty-boy, you're going to have to help with this. See, if this makes you go through the ceiling, Der Kommandant will have my guts for garters, as the saying goes. They've got a list of stuff at the nurses' station that nobody's allowed to bring in here."

"I know," Chaz said. He liked his other list better than the one they kept at the nurses' station, horrible as it had been. The other list wasn't seven days' worth of vengeful ghosts.

"So." She patted the bag. "This is on it, because it's food."

"I'm not allowed to have food?"

"Not unless it comes from the kitchen here."

"No wonder I'm not gaining weight." That wasn't fair. It wasn't a bad hospital kitchen, especially considering that most of his calories were coming from the tube threaded down his goddamn *nose*, so there was a limit to what he could swallow without risk of choking.

Steady there. He pushed away another surge of frustration and fear. He was getting better at pushing.

"Yeah, well. So I brought this. But promise, if you feel as if...it'll make you sick, say so right away, and I'll disappear it." She held out her little finger, crooked.

Chaz knew what the pause in that speech was for. "Make you sick" sounded so much better than "make you freak out." "Sick" was something you

couldn't be expected to control.

He didn't always get a lot of warning, on the panic or the AZT puking. But he hooked his left pinkie carefully in hers. "I promise."

She let go and pulled a pack of sanitary napkins out of her purse.

"Umm. Hafs?"

"Hel-lo, *smuggling*, Pookie. And how sad is it that hospital staff go all 'Leper, unclean' over maxi-pads?"

Curiosity. That felt good, the little jab of brain chemistry. "Did they?"

"Honey, if they'd lifted it out of the bag, I'd have been so busted."

Now he could see the tape closing the bottom of the package. And from the way Hafidah held it, it was much too heavy. She pried the tape loose, and two plastic spoons fell out. "Mind you," she added, "there *are* maxi-pads in there. To hold the shape."

She dug into the opening and pulled out a round pint carton, shiny with condensation and melting frost.

He was salivating. He wondered if he might start crying. *That would be awful. Don't do that.*

Hafidha gave him a sideways look, as if she were afraid her gaze weighed more than he could handle. "It's ginger gelato. With pieces of ginger. Which are good for your stomach, you know. I thought it'd slide around the tube. You okay?"

He swallowed. "Yeah. I'm okay." His voice cracked.

She pulled off the top. He smelled ginger, cream, sugar. A wind from paradise. She handed him one of the plastic spoons and held out the carton.

He scraped the surface, the spoon catching on a ginger bit. He pried it free. Just a taste, not even a mouthful. If he wanted more, he'd have to-- He was breathing too fast. *Easy, cowboy.* If he wanted more, he'd scoop up more. He was in charge.

He put the spoon in his mouth, let the gelato slide off onto his tongue and melt. When all that was left was the bit of ginger, he chewed that, long and

thoroughly. If he choked, Hafs would get busted. He closed his eyes and swallowed.

When he opened them, she was leaning forward staring, like someone watching the bomb timer count down. *My friends waiting for me to go off. Get used to it, Chaz.* Then the funny got through his filters: Captain Neutrino survived the plutonium ice cream! He grinned. "You'll never get that back out of here without getting caught. We'll have to finish it."

They took turns. He didn't get quite half the carton, because he got tired. But he made a respectable dent.

Therapeutic Policy

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

As long as he's not on a feed, Chaz has permission to get out of bed. Therapeutic policy doesn't hold with keeping patients bedbound anymore unless it's medically necessary. *Use it or lose it.* Balance, muscle tone, motor control: it's easier to keep them than to get them back, once they atrophy.

Chaz is grateful. Even when he's shuffling to the bathroom one painful step at a time, dragging the IV cart, pausing to rest between steps, biting his lower lip in grim determination. He's not quite out of his mind on the pain medication. Not nearly as out of his mind as he'd like to be, anyway, when every incautious reach makes his eyes sting and his breath shorten. The sutured muscles of his back have knotted, armored around the injuries, and he moves as if somebody had drilled holes in his scapulae and wired them together across his spine.

It's okay, though, because he's allowed to walk to the bathroom.

The bathroom is more than three steps from his bed. Eight feet, a huge terrifying arc of freedom. And nothing at all to stop him from going there any time he wants. When he's done, maybe he'll even go sit in the chair by the window. If he can make it that far. It only costs a handful of calories.

He can spare that many. The feeding pump beside his bed and the prickle of paper and adhesive on his nose and cheek have already become familiar.

Amazing, what a pleasure the absence of thirst is. And most people never even realize it. Someday, he thinks, he'll be able to appreciate what a pleasure the absence of pain is, too.

Today is not that day.

He avoids catching his reflection in the mirror by the door and shuts himself into the bathroom. He's grateful hospital scrubs don't require managing a zipper. With his right wrist and thumb in a cast--not *restrained* by a cast; he thinks around that idea, and the sensation of pressure on his wrist--and his shoulders cramped into a hunch, it would be nearly impossible. At least, by the color of his urine, he's adequately hydrated.

The mirror over the bathroom sink is harder to avoid. He opens the bathroom door before he washes his hands--or as much of them as he can, around the cast--because he doesn't like being in the tiny room, unable to sense what might be coming up behind him. He keeps his eyes on the faucet. When he's done, he steadies himself on the edge of the sink, careful to keep his weight on the left side. He'll rest here, just a minute, and then he'll walk to the chair by the window. A curly-edged paperback lies on the seat, half-finished, some ridiculous cozy mystery Reyes brought and forgot. That Reyes reads books about cats solving murders is not as amusing as it should be.

He wonders if Reyes tried to get the mirrors pulled out of his hospital room.

Chaz lifts his chin and looks himself in the eyes. Just the eyes for now: bloodshot, but they haven't changed. Still his own eyes, right one brighter than the left, lightened by radial streaks. The rest, however--

His tan has faded; he looks more greenish than sienna. The patch of paper tape stands out due to brightness rather than pallor. Lank hair falls across his forehead; he badly wants a shower he's not permitted. His cheekbones still stare through taut skin, but the hollows under his eyes might be starting to fill in a little. Slowly, curiously, he raises the edge of the blue hospital tunic and touches his ribs. If he were a rock face, they'd be a highway.

He looks up again. Still there, in the mirror. But only for as long as he stands here. As soon as he turns away, the mirror will forget him. He'll be erased, as if he had never been. Suicide would be easy. All he'd have to do is slam a few neurons, time it between feedings.

Something in his life ought to be easy. Just this once.

No chance of becoming the monster then. Just failure to thrive, like you might expect of any abandoned baby.

He could just look in the mirror and efface himself. Erase himself. Be nothing.

Before his eyes, he fades into translucency. A shadow in the mirror.

It feels good.

Until he spots a flicker of motion in the glass, a swirl of red, a flutter. *Beautiful red wings, baby boy.* Chaz gags around the NG tube, turns too fast, staggers, pulling the mirrors around him.

No wings. Not there. Not real. He's overbalanced because he's weak and injured and tethered to an IV stand, not because enormous pinions drag his shoulders down. And the shimmer of red--

It's a woman in a scarlet cardigan and neat black skirt, leaning hesitantly in the door. She's fiftyish, round-faced, plump, vital, with a buttery brown complexion and gleaming gray-shot black hair that suggest Indian or Pakistani ancestry. "Doctor Villette?"

She's looking right at him when she says it, but her eyes sweep past, glancing off as if from ice. *Activate cloaking device, captain.*

"Hello?" he says, dragging the IV stand forward. He tries to straighten up, take confident steps. It doesn't work. His stomach cramps brutally from the HIV prophylaxis. His back won't unkink.

The woman squeaks when she hears his voice, startles and jumps into the room.

"Sorry," he says. *I was invisible.*

A wave of dizziness threatens to capsize him. He steadies himself against the IV stand, and the next thing he knows she's behind him with the plastic visitor's chair.

Gratefully, he sinks down, rests his elbow on his knee and his forehead on his hand. "Low blood sugar," he says. "Nearly time for baby's two o'clock feeding."

"Yes," she says. "That's why I'm here."

She has a sheaf of paper tucked under one arm, where she must have stuffed it when she grabbed the chair. She finds the other chair, drags it over, and sits down beside him. "Are you okay to talk? Do you need a minute? Should I help you back to bed?"

He waves her off. "Excuse me," he says, a little dizzied by her energy. "Who are you?"

"Oh!" She sits upright. "Dr. Srinivasan. I specialize in metabolic disorders. Which makes you a bit outside my specialty, because your metabolism doesn't seem in the slightest disordered. Actually, it's admirably adapted to doing what it needs to do to support your brain function--"

"You're the guy," he says, the pattern coming clear in his head. Despite himself, he likes her--the full-steam-ahead, the clever use of language. The not being at all like a doctor. "The nutritionist guy. Reyes' friend."

When she smiles, both cheeks dimple. "That's me."

He would sit back, in relief, if his back didn't protest. "So you know about--"

"Your uncommon nutritional requirements? Yes. I'm joining your care team. We're going to work on getting you a more tailored diet. I have printouts of your food journal--" She holds up the sheaf of paper, watching his expression, and hastens to add, "Agents Worth and Gates provided them for me. They also made me swear fifteen different ways that I wouldn't tell anyone, even Stephen, about it. They hold you in very high regard, Dr. Villette."

"Chaz," he says.

"Amrita," she replies, and holds out her left hand to shake, mindful of his cast or lazy about the papers in her right one. He scrubs sweat from his palm before he accepts the clasp. Her hand is small and warm and dry, her fingernails plain and immaculate. "Stephen speaks highly of you."

Chaz finds himself thinking about the warmth in her tone as she says Stephen, and decides not to pursue that line of speculation. *Don't profile the boss. Don't profile the doctor. Don't profile the boss's potential relationship with the doctor....*

In his head, Brady says, mockingly, *Nobody likes to think of their father having sex.* If she were a profiler, and not a nutritionist, there's no way he could hide the way his fingers wanted to curl into his suddenly-cold palms.

As soon as Dr. Srinivasan is out of the room, he's going to have to call Hafidha and tell her that his new nutritionist is Reyes' girlfriend. Or ex-girlfriend. Just possibly.

It hurts his head.

She looks at the papers; she's covered them with tiny neat notes in purple ink. "It looks like you've been maintaining on five and a half thousand calories a day, roughly. Are these scrupulous?"

"Tolerably," he says. She scoots closer, and he leans over her shoulder to read her notes.

"And you started supplementing in October."

"I did. It seems to help."

"Good," she answers. "We'll do that again. Really--" she rattles the paper for emphasis, "--you've been doing extremely well, in a very difficult situation. What concerns me now is that weight loss over the term of your captivity seems to be in excess of these demands--"

"I wasn't actually 175," he says. "I lied to the computer to get it to nudge up the caloric requirement."

"Okay," she says. "So, 160 or so?"

He nods. "Or so."

She looks him over critically. "Your last weigh-in was 58.5 kilograms, so... 129 pounds. That's after two days in the hospital. And water weight gain. You were severely dehydrated."

He nods. He knows.

She continues, "So, if we're conservative about the water weight, call it 25 pounds of fat and muscle tissue lost over the course of a week. 3500 calories is a pound. 25 times 3500 is 87,000 calories. 87,000 calories divided by seven is 12,500 calories a day." She does the math in her head, on the fly. Even as she's painting him into an inescapable corner, he continues to like her. "That's two and a half times your usual requirement, Chaz. And that's what almost killed you."

Plainspoken, blunt, turning to watch his face as she speaks.

If Reyes trusts her, Chaz can too. After all, it's not like it's illegal to be a freak. "Do you know about slamming?"

"You mean anomalous neural activity?"

"Yes," he says. "We call it slamming. Slamming neurons. I...did it a lot."

"Wow," she says. She looks at her charts again, looks between them and him. "Wow. Sorry, it's one thing to know it, and another to see it in the flesh? Arctic explorers and channel swimmers are only supposed to burn around 13,000 calories a day. This is... "

"Sorry," he says. She's still staring at him steadily, eyes bright and intent. He forces himself not to glance down.

"No," she says. "But I think what I said about your metabolism, earlier, was insufficiently impressed. Your body is an amazing machine."

His hands are so cold, but he doesn't dare rub them on his scrubs to warm them. *She knows. She knows I converted, which means Reyes knows, which means they know I hid it--*

He breathes deep, makes his fingers relax on his knees, and lies. "It was sustained activity," he says. "Lack of sleep. Constant slamming. Even normally, just at work, I can burn two pounds in a day, and that's with pushing seven thousand calories."

The smile doesn't feel forced. He can't tell how it looks.

Whether she believes him or not, she drops her gaze to the notes. "Amazing machine," she repeats. "And I think I can help you give it the fuel it needs to run optimally," she says, and pats his knee. "And Dr. Villette? Despite my friendship with your superior officer, I want you to understand that anything we discuss will be held in the strictest confidence."

He's not sure--he doesn't know her well enough yet--to be sure if she's letting him know she'll cover for his lie, or if she believed it.

She continues, "Now, our first priority is weight gain, of course, so we're going to continue on the NG feeds for now. But not for too much longer, and when you come off them, we're going to drive food services crazy, you and me...."

Two-handed Grip

J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C., June 2008

Nikki Lau stood at the rear of shooting booth number four, watching Hafidha load .40 caliber cartridges into a magazine. *Like watching a t'ai chi master,* she thought. Perfect focus, perfect relaxation, no motion wasted. Hafidha's thin brown fingers compressed the spring feed, pinched cartridges from the box, popped them in place. Her face said there was nothing in the world except cartridge, magazine, countertop, the semi-auto lying on it. Here, now. All else is illusion.

Lau watched, and thought about what it meant to be bulletproof.

"You are not, of course, making me nervous," Hafidha said, without looking up.

"Because nothing makes you nervous." Once, Lau would have believed it.

Hafidha locked the magazine into the Glock, racked the slide, and laid the pistol back on the counter, muzzle pointed downrange. Then she looked up and smiled. "Are you planning to make actual holes in paper, or are you gonna dry-fire and slack off?"

"I only had to load ten. I'm shooting the squinky little gun today."

"Did I call the Walther 'squinky'?"

"You did, you beast. Its feelings were hurt."

Hafidha shook her head. Light caught the red and silver beads on the scrunchy that held back the cloud of her hair. "Oh, man. Tell it I apologize. I don't want it to misfire if you're saving my ass."

"I'll take care of that right now." Lau stepped around the partition to booth three. *You can talk later,* chica, she told herself. *Head in the game.* Then she thought, *Chicken.*

Lau had lost count of the number of times she'd used the basement range in the Hoover building. But there was still something strange and wonderful about it, and about her being in it. It smelled of machine oil and hot metal and smoke, like the inside of an engine. Everything in it was functional, purposeful.

Commercial ranges had ad stickers on the airlock doors, jokes (many of them annoying) and trophies and memorabilia in the front room. Here the surfaces were plain, clean, and bare. Signs only told shooters things they needed to know. *Do the work*, this place said. *Leave your ego, politics, sex, race, and religion outside.*

She hooked her electronic muffs off the scuffed countertop (how many people had stood here before her?) and settled them over her ears. She flipped the lever that brought the target holder on its cable zipping back to booth three, clipped the silhouette on it, and called, "Twenty yards to start?" She took off her watch and laid it on the counter.

"Works for me," Hafidha's voice replied from the other side of the partition.

The whine of the two cables carrying two targets out to the twenty-yard mark sounded like a mosquito through her hearing protection.

The little Walther snugged into the hollow of her palm when she closed her fingers around the grip. The Taurus PRO she carried on her hip held more rounds, shot Bureau-standard .40 caliber, and performed just as it ought. But with the ten-shot nine millimeter Walther, she understood why people shot for fun. Because of that, she tried to practice twice as often with the Taurus.

Hafidha fired first. Lau resisted the temptation to see where that shot had gone, and checked the second hand on her watch instead. Push-pull grip, sight picture, squeeze, sight again, squeeze... Lau counted ten shots as the action locked open. She checked her watch again. Six seconds. Meh. Hafidha's target was already swooping back toward the firing line. Lau thumbed the lever to bring hers in.

"Evildoers beware," Hafidha crowed from her booth.

"That good, huh?"

"False modesty is beneath me. How'd you do?"

The holes were grouped loosely, high and left. *That wouldn't have killed William Villette.* The little shock was almost familiar now, the cold, sick feeling that started behind her eyes, ran down her skin, and finished in her gut. Anxiety response. The one she woke with in the middle of the night, convinced Chaz was still lost and she had to find him *now*.

She swallowed. Perky voice, Valley Girl cheerleader. "Let's say I'd have been in trouble if Mr. Target hadn't stood still."

"That's because you're thinking about whatever you want to talk to me about."

Well, shit. Lau laid the Walther down on the counter and rounded the partition into the next bay. Hafidha was already taking out her earplugs. They had the range to themselves; it was all right.

Lau's palms were damp. If she didn't shake hands or wipe them on her trousers, no one would know that. "I could use some advice. Sort-of-advice."

"As long as it's not about romance." Hafidha made it "RO-mance," drawling and satirical. She turned to unclip her target; Lau couldn't see her face when she said, "I've decided I have no clue about that."

Lau was tempted to chase that one. Hafs had speed-dated her way confidently through a host of interesting and decorative guys, and had seemed content to have it so. *Nuh-uh. Follow through, girl.* "Which makes two of us. But no. This is about hospital visiting protocol."

Like a click of the pause button: Hafidha, hands still raised and holding her target. Then she looked over her shoulder, eyebrows arched above her glasses frames, and the video went on. "Call first. No one wants a girl he has a crush on to see him in a hospital johnny."

Lau started to laugh. And was horrified when her throat clenched on the sound, when she gulped and coughed air, when tears stung in her eyes.

There was no place to sit. She pressed her back against the partition, and felt Hafidha tuck a tissue into her fingers. She swiped at her eyes and blew her nose. "Sorry," she gasped.

"That was...sudden."

"Yeah. It's-- I don't want to do that to Chaz."

"He'd hate that."

Lau nodded, bit her lip, and looked up into Hafidha's face. "I've got a friend...my best friend. She was... Her father abused her. She told a few people, after it stopped. It was so hard to know what to do. If I ignored it,

that would have been a lie. But if it changed how I treated her--even for the better--I'd be saying it made her someone else. I didn't want to hurt her. And I didn't know how *not* to."

Hafidha listened with her head tipped, frowning. "Ah. And now it's Chaz."

"Yeah." Dana had chosen to tell her. If Chaz had been able to choose, would he have hidden away for a few months and come back healed, so he wouldn't have to face his teammates and know that behind their faces was the memory of him broken and helpless? She could tell him it didn't matter. She couldn't say it didn't exist.

"This girl who was abused." Hafidha turned back to the counter, dropped the empty magazine out of the Glock into her right palm. "You still friends with her?"

"Still my best friend. Even after her brother and I split up."

"Then you got it right that time." Hafidha nodded and began to reload the magazine. "I'm going to see him after work. Want to come along?"

It would be easier, just for this first time. And Hafidha wouldn't offer if she thought Lau would screw it up. "Please."

"Have you reloaded yet? Come on, sugar. I need to kick your ass at twenty-five yards."

Lau took a deep breath and let it out. "Yeah, good luck with that." She sounded almost normal. Which was enough.

Fox and Coyote

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

Once upon a time, at the end of the dark night of the world, Fox and Coyote were playing cards.

Draw, stud, hold 'em--each hand was a new puzzle. Each puzzle was a handful of time snatched and saved from ruin. The well filled up over the waking day, until by night it brimmed with memory, fear, lost chances, dread, nightmares-in-waiting, deep enough to top the head of even a very tall man and drown him.

Sol Todd knew it from experience.

Except for the occasional outbreak of restrained bluffing, it wasn't chatty poker. Usually for Sol the best part of a poker game was the commentary, the puns, the patter of his fellow players. But these games on these nights were mathematical exercises, games of statistics and probability. Whatever filled that well, it was made of words and emotions, not math.

They played for toothpicks, because that made it real.

On occasion, a nurse would appear at the door. "You'd better wind this up, sir. You're keeping Agent Villette from his sleep." They would raise their heads from their cards and nod to keep the peace. Either of them could have said, "That's the point."

Neither was foolish enough to admit it out loud. The trick only worked if you didn't explain it.

Sol always shuffled and dealt. They didn't talk about that, either.

He'd played cards with Chaz more often than he could count. It was one of the ways the team tested each other and themselves and pretended they were just passing time. When Chaz shuffled, his spider-leg fingers looked awkward, but the cards flew and blurred, fanned and bridged and flipped in the sharper's distracting seven-veils dance. He dealt like a casino pro, swift and precise.

The first time Sol shuffled the deck on the hospital's overbed table, the fingers of Chaz's cast-bound right hand twitched. Only once, and never

again. Chaz's eyes followed Sol's hands as they squared the deck the first time. After that, during the deal, they settled anywhere else.

Sol wondered how and when Chaz learned to play cards. He planned to ask someday, when he thought Chaz could choose between an answer and a story.

A person ought to be allowed to choose between non-fiction and fiction, at least among friends. Non-fiction and silence was a lousy choice, after all. Someday Chaz would have a story about learning to play cards. Someday he'd have one about that house in Texas, too. Maybe a handful of them. But it took distance and long practice to turn terror and pain into a narrative, then into one that could be shared.

And killing, in the end, was just another story.

"Fold," Chaz said, and mucked his cards.

Chaz folded more often than he used to. Sol wouldn't have called him a reckless player, before. But he could figure the odds, and he wasn't afraid of losing. Now, without even pennies at stake, he was a stone.

Sol nudged the little heap of toothpicks toward himself with a fingertip. "Just in time for corn on the cob season."

A muscle in Chaz's throat twitched; his gaze flicked up and away. "Month and a half still," he said, as if offering a hypothesis.

You could lose time with PTSD, like a drunk with blackouts. Your memory could be written over. "Among us decent folk accustomed to properly-grown corn. We know it's only knee-high by the Fourth of July. Though honestly, I don't think I ever saw corn that short on the Fourth that wasn't flooded out. But people will insist on grilling corn on Independence Day, so some heretics must be perverting nature for their own ends."

"You ate four unnatural ears last Memorial Day."

"I can't afford to miss an opportunity to eat even inferior corn on the cob. Someday I'll be awash in regret and denture adhesive."

Chaz grinned, which turned into a yawn. He didn't bother to hide it with either hand. Sol tried to remember if that was normal for Chaz, but couldn't bring an instance to mind.

"Time I blew this pop stand." Sol stood up. His ass ached from the plastic chair, as always, but as always, he didn't wince or groan. "Have to be home for a phone call." He reset the table height so it would clear the bed and Chaz's knees.

"From the Left Coast?"

Chaz had made a joke of sounding wistful over Liz's calls from San Diego. An agreeable fiction that let him, and Sol, pretend he wasn't wistful. The note was missing this time, replaced with nothing at all. "Yep," said Sol. He watched Chaz hold neutral up before his sallow, bony face for a count of three before he looked away, turning to the clock as if it mattered what time it was.

That was something to think about on the ride home.

Sol stretched and walked to the door. "I'll tell the valkyries at the nurse's station they can come and tuck you in."

"Duke?"

He turned back. Chaz had settled against the slant of his bed, but his eyes were open, his face intent. "Are you ever going to tell anyone how you lost the fingers?"

Sol wrinkled his brow and thrust his lower lip out, just enough to be too much. It was a reflex; it happened before he could decide if it was a good idea. "I *have* told you."

Chaz didn't protest, or laugh. He just waited. Sol thought of Reyes: the same unchanging face, the unblinking eyes, the relentless, ruthless patience. Reyes wouldn't have needed to ask again, either. "I may," Sol said. "If I need to."

Chaz's eyes narrowed; he nodded.

As he walked down the hall to the desk, Sol wondered what Chaz had just heard. He hoped it was good.

Spiral

Baltimore, MD, June 2008

It's a hospital, and it smells like hospitals everywhere. It's not the smells of antiseptic that get to Natasha McAndrews at times like this; it's the smell of laundry detergent. Tide. It reminds her of home, which reminds her of Mom, which reminds her of hospitals, which reminds her of laundry detergent--

It could be something of a death spiral if she let it.

But she's not here for her drama. She's here for Chaz, and for him she endures the (lackadaisical) search, and the list of forbidden objects (Flowers, candy, food. My God, what happened to him?), and the lecture from the charge nurse about not tiring the patient. Tasha assures him she'll be in and out in no time, she's just coming to drop off some clothes and computer games.

"He has a lot of friends," the nurse says, handing Tasha her lightly-inspected handbag and the plastic sack of sweaters and sweat-pants back.

Tasha, who just had this fight with Michael, thank you, is at first inclined to prickle at the comment, but she backs the response down and manages a smile. It could be approval. Actually, judging by the nurse's faint, hopeful smile, it is approval. "He earns them," she says, and nods pleasantly as she walks down the hall to the indicated door and taps lightly on the frame.

"Gecko?"

"Come in," he says, a voice so normal that for a moment she lets herself believe that everything is all right. Until she pushes the door open and enters.

Propped up, Chaz huddles under the sheets and the off-white hospital bedspread, wrapped up in a fuzzy cardigan that can't do anything to hide the way the bones of his shoulders want to poke through the skin. He's unrecognizable, except the cheekbones and the eyes, the skin of his face stretched across the bone as if laminated. A tube runs from a whirring machine beside the bed; it's taped beneath his nose. The other end

disappears up his nostril. The tendons in his cheeks flex when he opens his mouth. "Hi, Tasha."

"Jesus," she says, feeling the way her face fails to respond with anything but horror and denial, and she instantly regrets it.

But somehow, it's the right thing to do. His ravaged mask pulls itself into a smile, and she recognizes the smile, too, the crooked teeth and the way it tugs his chin pointier. "Thank you," he says.

"Chaz, I--"

"No, really." He holds up a hand. "Come over here, please? I would get up, but they have me on this stupid feeding machine." He gestures to the whirring thing beside the bed.

She comes, a little unwillingly, until she is close enough to touch, close enough that the smell of how ill he's been fills up her nostrils and she can't smell the detergent anymore. She drops the bag beside the bed and makes herself reach out and take his hand, like a bunch of sticks wrapped up in a worn paper bag. "You look awful," she says, and tries to make it cheerful, teasing.

The smile does not fail. If anything it broadens. "You come by any time," he says. "Everybody else tries to lie to me. But I know how bad this looks."

She squeezes his hand, which is so cold she has a hard time believing he's alive. But he squeezes back, and reaches up and touches her face before he lets the limb fall back to the bed, palm-up, as if the gesture exhausted it. The fingers curl like a dying spider's legs.

"What happened?" she asks, finally. "Nobody will say."

He coughs, or maybe it's a laugh. "I got stuck someplace bad," he says. "And I couldn't get food for a week or so, and my metabolism nearly killed me."

"Hiking?" she asks. "Climbing?"

He shakes his head and looks away, and she closes her mouth over the next words. It's Chaz: sometimes he wants to be wheedled. But not this time, she thinks. "I brought you some computer games. And a bunch of really stupid comedy DVDs. Worthie said you had your laptop."

A flash of gratitude, and the smile has returned when he turns back. "Hey," he says, reaching out to grab her hand once more. "Don't cry."

"I'm not crying," she lies. "The gang says Hi. Steve says you only did this because you knew you were going to lose that bet, and you didn't want to be his belay slave for the next two months."

"Steve." He rolls his eyes, and that looks like Chaz too, not this dying stranger with Chaz's voice and eyes. No. Dammit. Not dying, though, no matter how much he looks like Mom near the end, skinny and tired. "How's Michael?"

That makes her grin, which makes her sniffle, which makes Chaz laugh. And that makes it okay. "Michael," she says, echoing the tone of his flat *Steve.* "He's jealous as hell that I'm here with you. Even though I told him that you and me was just a thing, you know. And that I was coming to see you as a friend."

"It's a hospital," he says. "What does he think is going to happen?" But he's pleased. Guys are nearly always pleased when other men see them as a threat.

"He's afraid you were better in bed than he is," she says, to get a laugh.

It's a little laugh, and it sounds like it's uncomfortable laughing around the feeding tube, but it's still a laugh. "And?"

"Oh, no," she says. "I'm not answering that question. I never bring bad news to a convalescent."

There, that gets the laugh, full-throated and deep enough that he looks noticeably tired afterwards, as if it took all his energy to move that air in and out. He gestures weakly with his free hand, the one in the cast. "Ow," he says. "Ow, ow, ow--" And then his face brightens, and he says, breathlessly, "You ever need a threat to keep him in line, you just let him know I'm out here lurking hungrily, like a particularly funny-looking shark." He leans back against the pillows, chest heaving.

She grins. She stands up again, and leans over, and kisses him on the forehead. Under the sickness, he still smells like Chaz. "Get some rest," she says. "We'll all still be here when you're up to climbing again."

He squeezes her hand, but his eyes are already closing. As she disentangles her fingers and picks up her handbag, she breathes a little sigh of relief, hoping he can't hear her. Hospital braved. Duty discharged, friend seen to. And she thinks she can tell the gang honestly that he's going to be okay.

Chaz Villette's LiveJournal, June 5th, 2008

coyote in a sheepdog suit

triumphant return

Jun. 5th, 2008 at 6:14 AM

...hi.

...know i have a lot of explaining to do. really sorry i worried anybody. long story short, did something dumb and got hurt pretty bad (cut up, broken bones, dislocation, exposure) and in the hospital. tubes everywhere =/= <3. strung out and stupid on pain meds, but will live.

typing a little messed up by hand cast. :-P:-P:-P:-P (almost said one-handed typing. not like **that**, you perverts.)

still just mostly wants to sleep... like cat... 18+ hours/day. sorry if i don't answer back comments and stuff. mbe l8r.

thank everybody for well-wishes. harpy printed them out. good bedtime reading.

txanne, think i owe you dinner. so sry. :-(

saoba, thank you for music.

carpe_noir, i hear there's a mysterious package...

inaurolillium, hear you have nearly as many job offers as you deserve. good on you. u shld b twins.

the wabbit brought me a set of *good eats* dvds (good bcuz hospitals r boring). i'm sleeping through those.

had a dream i had alton's kitchen elves.

want-want alton's kitchen elves. (y/y)

ha. took me hours (?days?) 2 type this much btwn sleeps. stopping now.

sleep again. ttyl.

- Current Mood: embarrassed
- Current Music: Kan'Nal – Coyote

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